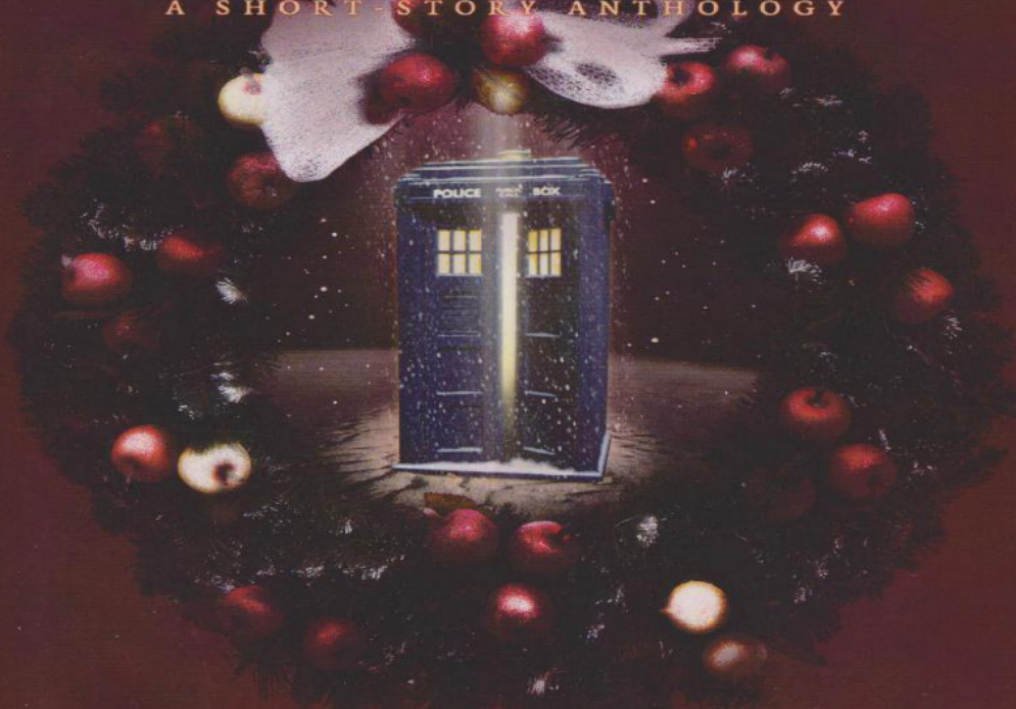
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

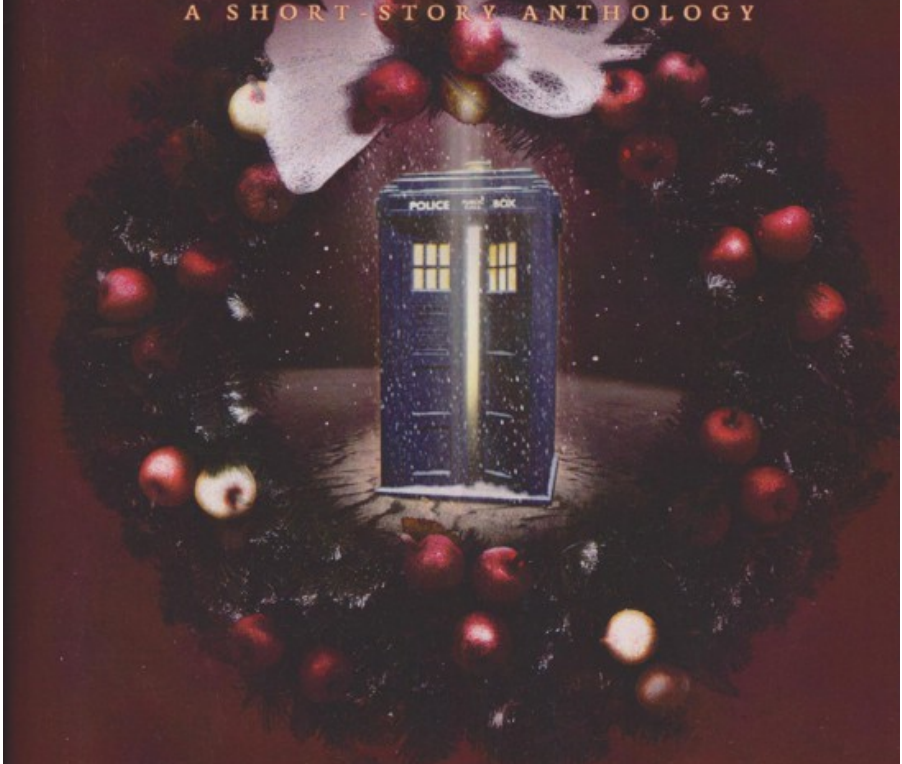
SIMON GUERRIER

BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

SIMON GUERRIER

TWENTY-FOUR BRAND NEW ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE!

SHORT TRIPS: THE HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

EDITED BY
SIMON GUERRIER

Christmas is a time for many things. For family and old acquaintances. For giving, for receiving, for feasts and celebration. For huddling round the warmth of the fire, sheltered from the dark and the cold outside.

And the monsters.

It's also the busiest time of year for the mysterious Doctor, whether he's caught up in the violence of ancient Rome, taking Leonardo da Vinci on a day-trip to the stars, or popping in on the very first Christmas on the moon.

Spend Christmas with the Doctor. If you dare.

Featuring stories by as Marc Platt, Jonathan Clements, Eddie Robson, Joseph Lidster and many more!

ISBN 1-84435-149-1

9 781844 351497

UK: £14.99
Science Fiction

www.bigfinish.com

BIG FINISH

CONTENTS

The Lampblack Wars Matthew Sweet

1

Home Fires Jonathan Blum

11

The Feast Stewart S h ea rgo I d

19

Rome Marcus Flavin

29

Set in Stone Charles Auchterlonie & John Isles

45

The Thousand Years of Christmas Simon Bucher-Jones 53

Presence Peter Anghelides

59

Danse Macabre Joff Brown

67

The Church of Saint Sebastian Robert Smith

77

The Prodigal Sun Matthew Griffiths

85

Be Good For Goodness's Sake Samantha Baker

91

Ode to Joy Jonathan Clements

97

Nobody's Gift Kate Orman

103

The Innocents Marc Platt

109

Comforts of Home Pete Kempshall

125

Christmas on the Moon Simon Guerrier

133

The Anchorite's Echo Scott Andrews

1 53

The Revolutionaries John S. Drew

159

The Gift Robert Dick

167

Callahuanca Richard Salter

1 75

Not in My Back Yard Eddie Robson

181

She Won't Be Home Joseph Lidster

1 97

Saint Nicholas's Bones Xanna Eve Chown

213

The Long Midwinter Philip Purser-Hallard

219

The Lampblack Wars

Matthew Sweet

An Adventure of the Third Doctor,

with Sarah Jane Smith

It was the corset that bothered Sarah Jane Smith — and not just because it had been a two-person job. She'd expected the Doctor to leave her to it, but no — he hadn't shown the least sign of embarrassment as he laced the thing around her waist, fussing and flapping and singing Jolly *Good* Luck to the Girl Who *Loves* a *Soldier* in his best Palace-of-Varieties baritone.

Ì suppose you wear a lot of frilly things yourself,' she'd said, willing herself not to blush.

The Doctor's appearance had only required the smallest adjustments to comply with the sumptuary codes of nineteenth-century London: the bottle-green smoking jacket, the Adam Adamant cape, the shirt with two strips of embroidered lace escorting the buttons up to his monstrous collar — these alone would have allowed him to pass for a minor Pre-Raphaelite. His physical features — the flurry **of** Arctic curls, the fuzzy sideburns, the prodigious nose, strong as a dodo's beak didn't detract from the image. And now that the TARDIS wardrobe had furnished him with a velvet-lined topper and a silk tie to match his jacket, perhaps, thought Sarah Jane, he looked a bit too Victorian. Perhaps people would think he **was** taking the mickey.

The TARDIS had washed up under one of the arches of Covent Garden market.

Stallholders were packing away their crates. Boys were sweeping up stray cabbage leaves and spirals of discarded orange peel. A dog nosed around with a disappointed air, as if he wished he'd gone to Smithfield. Sarah took a lungful of pleasantly frosty air. `So what's there to do on a Saturday night in Victorian London?' she asked. 'Besides staying in to read religious tracts and listen to the **lady** of the house playing Schubert?'

The Doctor closed the police box door behind him. 'You've watched too much costume drama on television, Sarah Jane. Staying-in scenes are cheap. All you **need** is a pianoforte, a few nice frocks and Nyree Dawn Porter. They never show **you** what Victorians really got up to at night. How about a trapeze show? Or a **play** about Derby Day with six live horses on a conveyor belt, galloping away like **bllly-o?**'

He bowled out over the cobbles, lifted a copy of *The* Times from the hands of a newspaper vendor, and scanned the front page. Sarah fumbled in her bag for a **coin** and pressed it into the boy's hand. The alacrity with which the lad scuttered **down** the street suggested that she had picked the wrong denomination.

`What takes your fancy?' the Doctor demanded. 'We could go for a curry in Berkeley Square. I think Dean Mohammed's place is still open — or perhaps he's downshifted to Brighton by now and become a masseur. We could take the train **down** to Sydenham and catch Blondin. If we're lucky we might see him pushing a lion across the highrope in a wheelbarrow. Or the business with the kitchen stove...' The Doctor's eyes glazed with pleasure. 'I was there, you know, when he tried that trick for the first time. He wheeled his little cooker across the rapids at Niagara Falls, cracked an egg into his pan and whisked up an omelette — a hundred feet over our heads! Then he lowered the pan down to a steamboat chugging away in the rapids. There was a terrific fight for a piece of the thing.

People grabbed for scraps, but didn't know whether to eat them or take them home as souvenirs.'

`Did you get some?' asked Sarah.

Òf course.'

Ànd?'

`Well, he was no Escoffier.'

Sarah took the newspaper, peered at the date under the masthead, and read it aloud: 14 December 186i. The Doctor, who was halfway through a bow to an elderly passer-by, spun round and stared at the front page over his companion's shoulder. He rubbed the back of his neck with the palm of his hand.

`We'd better decide quickly,' he said. 'In a few hours, entertainment will be rather hard to come by.'

Mary Prout had money in her purse. And something that was better than money.

She pulled the drawstring and slipped a hand inside. Her skin made contact with a nest of cool silver. That reassured her. Then she dug her fingers below the layer of coins until they touched an object of a different kind. A small glass bottle with a metal stopper. A cosy heat

pulsed inside, as if someone had filled it up with glowing charcoal. But no one had done any such thing, and Mary Prout *knew* it.

She felt the warmth rise through her fingertips, her hands, her arms, her shoulders, her neck. It felt good. It felt like Christmas.

Mary slipped from the pavement and pushed the door of a chophouse on the corner of Mercer Street. The proprietor had his ledger open on the counter, and was busy crushing tiny figures into the ruled columns. When he clocked Mary settling herself on a stool at the bar, he flipped the book shut, slid towards her, pulled a towel from his shoulder and gave the mahogany a brisk buffing.

`Beef Wellington,' *she* said, tearing off her fur wrap. 'And none of your cat's meat.' The proprietor overplayed his nod of assent. 'And some milky tea. And do me a couple of smokes.' She snapped a shilling on the counter. The proprietor scribbled down her order and thrust the tab through the hatch to the kitchen.

Then he pulled a little machine from under the bar, took out his tobacco pouch and a batch of papers, and began, with meticulous care, to roll his best customer a cigarette. She allowed him to place it in her mouth and light the end with a taper.

`The other one's for you, Freddie,' she said. 'Keep us company for a bit.' The proprietor busied himself with the construction of a second cigarette. Mary glanced towards the window — somebody, she noted, had etched a figure on the glass: a choirboy peering over his hymnal with an expression that was far from angelic.

`So, Mary,' ventured Freddie, licking along the edge of a fresh paper. 'Aren't you 2

pining for those early morning rides from Surrey? Aren't you yearning to be dragging watercress out of all that lovely freezing cold water? Don't you miss that dirty great wicker basket hanging off your arm all day?' He popped the completed cigarette from the rollers of the machine, and allowed Mary to light it from her own fag.

'I' m sick for it all,' she replied. 'But a private income's not such a terrible trial.

I can do as I please. I'm off to see the pantomime tonight.'

Mary's order appeared at the hatch. The proprietor pushed it across the counter.

She stubbed out her cigarette, gulped down a mouthful of tea and pierced the piecrust with her fork. A little cloud of steam rushed through the broken pastry.

'The death of an aunt is a terrible thing,' she declared. 'Even one you've never known. Even one you never really knew existed.'

The proprietor took a final drag. `So how did she make her dough, then, this old girl?'

Mary tapped her nose with the blade of her knife. 'From something none of us **can** do without,' she said. 'Something that tells us what's happening in the world, something that lets you keep track of what's in your till, Freddie. Something that lets you read your Bible and says what gee-gees are running at Beverley and what happened next to little Pip Pirrip.'

The proprietor looked blank. Mary filled him in. 'Ink, Freddie,' she murmured.

'Ink.'

On the stage of the Drury Lane theatre, twenty live pigs leapt from a row of wicker baskets, and the audience roared its approval.

'When are they going to dim the house lights?' asked Sarah.

'Not until the 188os at the earliest,' replied the Doctor, looking at his watch.

'Wagner was the first person to put the audience in the dark — and he only did it to stop them making eyes at each other during the recitative. At this point in the nineteenth century they give you plenty of light to let you read your programme.'

He slapped the printed pamphlet into her lap. 'What's the next scene?'

Sarah ran her eyes down the bill. 'A Peep at Turkey. The Topkapi Palace. The Seraglio. A tribute to Mr Grimaldi.' Set in the margin next to these words was a grinning, hairless figure with a beaky nose and monstrous staring eyes.

The Doctor rubbed his hands together with pleasure. 'You'll love this bit.'

Painted scenery flew in from above: wispy pink clouds suspended

above oriental domes and spires; pillars denoting the interior of the seraglio. The canvas tableau rippled slightly as it made contact with the boards. A pair of stagehands wheeled **a** fountain downstage left. Water began to bubble from its spout. Then, to a ripple **of** delight from the cheap seats, an old clown in a jewelled headdress shuffled into **the** limelight. He was just like the illustration in the programme: a comic monstrosity shaped from greasepaint and putty. He addressed the audience as if **he** were talking to them over his garden **wall.**

'These Turkish foreigners are a different kind of stuff to our English ladies,' he announced. 'For they — bless 'em! — are all pretty souls, and don't want for spirit, as **we** all know, when "the grey mare is the better horse" — and if the Ottomy-ladies 3

had but a little hedification at Billingsgate, the flatfish would soon prove themselves fine soles and make it all hot cockles with the muscle men!'

Laughter streaked through the auditorium. The woman sitting beside the Doctor gave him the honour of a nudge in the ribs. He turned to Sarah.

`Don't worry. I only got about half of that.'

Sarah sucked her teeth. 'It was smut, though, mainly, wasn't it?' The Doctor nodded. Sarah nodded too, and cast her eyes down to the programme.

What she saw made her catch her breath in horror. The pamphlet was open on her knee, at the page announcing the appearance of the clown. But the illustration had altered — and was continuing to alter before her eyes. The clown's leer had grown into something truly murderous. It had pulled some kind of sharp instrument from the pocket ofits pantaloons, and was now glaring at her from the paper, the sheeny black ink shifting about like the body of some organism glimpsed under a microscope. The clown raised a malignant eyebrow. It stuck out a tarry tongue. It winked. It shifted about on its feet, until it was visible in three-quarter profile. It raised the dagger above its head, and stalked towards the right-hand margin, over which it disappeared, presumably in pursuit of a victim on the next page.

The Doctor followed Sarah's gaze just in time to see a stockinged foot vanish from view. He picked up the programme and turned the page. The following illustration showed no signs of mobility, but it was utterly grotesque — the clown, its eyes mad with fury, was twisting a

knife into the prone body of Widow Twankey.

`Good grief,' breathed the Doctor.

And in the seat immediately behind him, a more demotic phrase passed through the mind of Mary Prout.

Simia the Missing Link sat by the tea urn and rummaged in her reticule for her Christmas card list. Her pencil, poised between her delicately hairy fingers, hovered down the list of names. 'I've an etiquette question,' she declared. 'Chang and Eng. One card or two? What's appropriate for Siamese Twins?'

The green room of the Egyptian Hall was thick with the smell of green tea and cheroot smoke. The last performance was coming to an end, and the turns were having a final drink before returning to their digs. Professor Hemdale spat on one of his dissolving views of the eruption of Mount Etna, and rubbed at the glass lantern slide with a grubby cuff. Miss Hutchinson the Pig-Faced Lady twisted the paper wrapper from a sherbet bonbon, popped the sweet in her mouth and clattered it across the back of her impressive teeth. Bracebridge Hunz, the celebrated zoologist, pored over his notes on the gibbon. Gabriel East, manager of the Sensational Talking Fish, dug under his fingernails with a teaspoon, and counted the tiles around the fireplace. It was left to Anak, the King of the Giants, an eight-foot Frenchman in a black silk kimono, to answer Simia's question.

`Just the one,' he said, without looking up from his copy ofThe Boy Detective. 'Eng was never much of a reader. I bought them a lovely morocco-bound volume of East 4

Lynne for their last birthday, and I don't believe he ever got past the bit where the heroine is mangled up in a train crash.' He paused. 'And then again, as both the brothers are Taoists, perhaps it would be better not to send one at all.'

Simia absorbed this intelligence, and scored the names from her list. Then her face crumpled to a frown. 'What about Julia Pastrana?' she ventured.

`Roman Catholic,' returned Anak. 'So you're perfectly safe there. But you do know that she's dead?' Simia didn't. Anak told her not to worry. 'That sad fact need not prevent you sending the season's greetings. Her husband had her cadaver perfectly embalmed. Some new Russian process, I believe. Most lifelike.'

Professor Hemdale packed away his slides, poured himself some tea from the urn and consumed the entire cup in one convulsive gulp. This action was swiftly followed by the kind of shudder a man might give after attempting to swallow a brace of live eels — which, coincidentally, was how he had spent much of the early part of his career, in draughty tents and exhibition rooms across the British Isles.

`You'll ruin your stomach, you know,' warned Simia.

Ì do know,' snapped Professor Hemdale. 'I'm a professor.' He muttered something disagreeable under his breath.

`Well, I was only saying. Some constitutions won't tolerate it. Miss Hutchinson there, she could stay up all night eating raw lamb chops without suffering the least bit of gastric unpleasantness.' Miss Hutchinson confirmed that this was true. She had, she professed, once consumed 17 oysters in a month that contained **two** Rs, and paid no price for it.

But Professor Hemdale was unmoved. 'Your line of expertise, Miss Simia, is swinging from the parallel bars and discoursing on the Theory of Natural Selection. Mine is vulcanology. I'm not sure whether either of us is qualified to pronounce upon the future of my bowels.'

Simia had no time to respond to this remark. The door flew open, and through **it** came the junior stage manager, George Evans. He was breathless and pale, and his spectacles magnified his veiny eyes into pools of bloodworms. 'No show tomorrow night, chaps,' he breezed. 'The bells of St Paul's are ringing.'

Anak put down his magazine. 'So he's gone, then?'

Evans nodded gravely.

Gabriel East put down his spoon as a mark of respect.

Simia took up her pencil, and crossed another name from her list.

Professor Hemdale raised a teacup. 'Merry Christmas,' he muttered, and collapsed into a fit of coughing.

The premises of Charles Goodall and Son were marooned in a gloomy courtyard **in** Seven Dials. Tallowy light spilled through the windows. Behind the glass, a selection of the firm's recent work was suspended on lengths of string: a card **bearing** an image of a robin carrying a sprig of holly in its beak; a penny number **of a** boys' serial entitled

Lost in the London *Sewers;* an engraving of Madame Vestris **as a** sans-culottes. Although it was nearly midnight, the sound of heavy machinery **thrummed** through the brickwork. Inside, business was clearly booming.

The Doctor seemed slightly out of his element. 'I wonder,' he said, 'whether it 5

might have been best to go straight to our man in the seraglio? He could be the source of what we saw. Perhaps he does telekinesis as well as dirty jokes.'

`Maybe he does,' countered Sarah. 'And we can go and see him in his dressing room when the show goes down. But as the firm that printed the programme is only around the corner from the theatre, it seems best to start here, doesn't it?'

The Doctor accepted the logic of the argument and yanked at the bell-pull. A voice from within attempted to answer them over the din of the machinery. Sarah, interpreting this noise as an invitation to enter, pushed open the door.

Inside the print shop, two men were working furiously at an enormous hand-operated press. One slopped ink on to the rollers, the other fed stiffpaper into the jaws of the machine. It was demanding work, and they were not prepared to stop for the benefit of visitors.

Ìf it's another job, we can't do it,' barked Mr Goodall, senior. 'We've got 17

quires of cartes-des-visites to get through, and the programmes for the Monster Concert at St Gart's Hospital. And then there's the Christmas cards for the Christian *Remembrancer.'*

Mr Goodall, Jr, wiped an arm across his face, which left an inky smear on his brow. 'I blame Gladstone,' he gasped.

The Doctor, understanding, commiserated. 'The repeal of the Paper Tax, you mean? All very well to do away with it, but who's going to print all the stuff, eh?'

Mr Goodall, senior, was pleased that the visitor understood their position.

`Precisely, sir!' he exclaimed. 'If only our clients were so understanding. Two years ago all we did was playing cards. Then the

tax on knowledge gets chucked in the scrag bin and we've barely been to bed since. Do you know there's a type famine on? We've been down the cellar to break out the old stuff Some of these cards will have to go out with the long 's' at the end of Christmas. Haven't used them since I was a boy. Embarrassing, isn't it? Makes us look like *The* Spectator.'

Ànd what about ink?' asked Sarah. 'Is there an ink drought?'

Mr Goodall, senior, loosed a dirty chuckle. Not round here, miss. But maybe you'll find one in the next street. Or in the next one.'

`You've found some way round it, then?'

`Let's just say, miss,' replied Goodall, Jr, 'that we no longer require the *services* of the lampblack factory.'

`Maybe,' said Goodall, senior, attempting to suppress an attack of hysteria,

`they'd better close it down and put a plaque on the wall saying, "Charles Dickens worked here."' Goodall, Jr, exploded with laughter and lurched backwards into a pile of uncut yellow paper. He only stopped laughing when a young woman in a fur wrap bounded into the shop.

`Hold the front page, boys,' she declared. 'The Prince Consort has retched his last. I reckon you'll need a drop more of the Everlasting!' She dipped her hand into her little velvet bag, and pulled out a bottle with a dainty silver stopper. As she did so, Sarah sensed a movement at the window. She turned to see a dark shape sliding up the pane. It was joined by another. And another — until the glass was black with the grinning faces of pantomime clowns.

* * *

6

It was Anak, King of the Giants, who discovered the body of Simia the Missing Link. And this was fortunate, because it was only Anak who had the power to bring her back to life.

Simia was slumped against the door of her dressing room, her bristly knees drawn up to her chest and her arms raised above her head, as though she had attempted to escape an assailant by pushing herself

across the floor on her back.

Around her body, the unpainted boards were scattered with small rectangular pieces of blank white cardboard.

Anak pulled a carved ivory tube from his carpet bag and used it to listen to her heart. 'Cardiac seizure,' he whispered. 'Excellent. Something in my repertoire.'

He knelt beside her and pressed his palms together in an attitude of prayer. After **a** few moments he unclasped his hands. A voice drifted up from the street: a newspaper seller shouting about death and Windsor Castle. A few moments passed in silence. Then, like a bored railway passenger lifting a discarded magazine from the seat, Anak picked one of the blank cards from Simia's body **and** turned it over in his hand. As he did, the glare of the gaslight picked out an impression on its bleached surface. If he held it at the right angle, he could just pick out a pair of words — 'Merry Christmaf' — and the ghost of a robin, clutching **a** sprig of holly in its beak.

'What happened to me?'

Simia's eyes had snapped open. She was struggling to raise herself from the floor.

'Nothing that a little drop of hartshorn couldn't cure,' cooed Anak. 'It was the **shock** of hearing the news about the Prince, I'm sure. What is she going to do without him? What are we all going to do without him?'

Anak helped Simia to her feet, keeping his back bent so as not to smack his **head** against any of the architraves. As they moved away from the dressing rooms, Simia began to regain her strength — to the extent that when they ran into George **Evans,** the stage manager scarcely noticed that anything was amiss.

'There's a gentleman to see you, sir,' he gasped, pulling off his spectacles and **rubbing** them on the front of his shirt. 'No card, but he introduced himself as the Doctor. Looked like he was in the profession.'

'More than one, actually,' trilled the Doctor, appearing behind Evans, and acknowledging Simia with a low bow. 'But I'm here in an amateur capacity **tonight.** I simply came to return an item of lost property to this gentleman.' The **Doctor's** eyes darted up and down Anak's body. 'What's that marvellous pudding **they make** on the Rock Belt of

Hextacosulous, Mr Anak? It's so long since I've **been.**'

Anak's face warmed with a nostalgic glow. 'Doctor, you're a man of taste **—**

despite the evidence of that blouson. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance.'

'**Do** you think if we described it to the chef at the Cremorne Gardens that he **might** be able to whoosh some up for us?'

'**We** can try. But I'm not sure that Chelsea has a grocer who would supply you **with** the milk of a Hextacosulite sand-cow. Not at this hour, anyway.'

* * *

7

At one o'clock on a more customary Sunday morning, the platform at the Cremorne Gardens would have been rattled by two-thousand feet moving to the beat of a Polka Mazurka. Tonight, the floor was bare. The resident orchestra, housed inside a wooden pagoda at the centre of the dance floor, played something slow and reassuring. A few couples wandered quietly under the elms that bordered the lawn. Swells and dodgers in the supper boxes consumed champagne and oysters with sepulchral seriousness. Sarah Jane Smith and Mary Prout sat at their table, watching the coloured gaslights play inside the crystal grotto.

`When I was a girl,' said Mary, turning the treasured glass bottle between her fingers, 'my father brought me here to see Madame Poitevin's balloon ascent.

They dressed her as Europa and sat her on the back of a bull. You should have heard it moo as they burnt up the gas.' She pressed the bottle against her cheek, enjoying its warmth. 'Do you think those things will follow me here?'

Sarah gazed across the deserted boards. 'Depends whether they like oysters.'

The door to the booth opened and in swept the Doctor, Simia and Anak. The giant ducked under the lintel, fixed Mary Prout with a steely stare, and seated himself at the head of the table. The Doctor

and Simia took their places either side of him, but said nothing.

`Mary Prout,' Anak began. 'I'm most happy to be reunited with you. The last time we met you were obliged to leave in a hurry. Shortly after a rummage in my carpet bag, I believe.' Mary Prout blushed. She set the silver-topped bottle down on the tablecloth.

Ìt's late,' sighed the giant. 'But before we all retire to bed, I'd like to tell you a story.' And he began his narrative. It was, reflected Sarah Jane Smith, the oddest after-dinner speech she had ever heard.

`There was once a place called Hextacosulous Blue. Its inhabitants had a huge appetite for one thing. War. And when one war had been concluded, the survivors began to prosecute another. And another. And another. Until, one morning, the generals announced that all the fun had gone out of the game, and that the remaining armies should direct their energies towards a new enemy: their sister world, Hextacosulous Green. The inhabitants of Green were just as bad. Most of them didn't have a conciliatory bone in their bodies. The war went on for ten-thousand years. And you know what? They enjoyed it. We in the Rock Belt — a scattering of asteroids that fills Hextacosulite space — just kept our heads down.

That's our way. My father was 11-feet tall and lived most of his life in the emergency tunnels. Lived there for ten-thousand years as Blue fought Green and Green fought Blue. Until one day, he woke up to silence. The battle appeared to be over. So a party of investigators rose up from the Rock Belt and made landfall on Blue and Green. Both worlds had become great blank white wastelands. Except, in an obscure corner of Hextacosulous Blue, my father discovered a small pool of thick dark liquid. It was moving, thrashing, writhing about. He put it under the microscope. And do you know what he saw? The war between the Green and the Blue. Who knows what weapon had wrought this transformation upon the parties, but there they were, in the field of the microscope, reduced to a slick of warring microbes. Tumbling, grasping, struggling. And so the war went on, in a 8

test tube in my father's study, for another ten-thousand years. It became a curiosity that he used to bring out at parties. He'd place it in the glare of the stereopticon, **and** we'd watch the battle projected on the ceiling. Until the day I decided to run away from home, and take it with me — hoping that I might earn a small living by using it to entertain paying customers. Until the day I came to London, and you, Mary Prout, invited me into the snug bar of the Lamb and Flag on Long Acre."

'Madam,' said the Doctor, steepling his fingers like a presiding Justice, 'do you realise that for the last three months, an interplanetary war has been raging in your handbag?'

Mary Prout was not listening. She was staring at a group of new dinner **guests who** had slipped, unannounced, into the room — flowing under the door like a puddle of sentient molasses, oozing over the wainscot and up the wallpapered boards of the booth; coalescing into a sea of tiny faces and figures. A gaggle of pantomime clowns; a flock of beady-eyed robins; a row of smiling choristers.

Other figures too, new to the party: a group of playing-card royals; sixteen Christmas puddings, their currants massing into malignant sneers; a conurbation **of** snow-stacked country churches; a forest of pear trees, each topped with a vicious-looking partridge.

'The robins on my Christmas cards,' gasped Simia.

'Anak,' said the Doctor, drily. 'Are we in any danger?'

'Only Mary Prout,' intoned the giant. 'She has kept this war close to her body for **three** months. She has nursed it in her pocket. Taken comfort from it. Now she **must** become its final battlefield.' He pushed the bottle across the table, until it **was** almost touching Mary's hands. 'Drink.'

'Don't do it,' whispered Sarah Jane Smith.

Anak ignored her. 'Drink,' he repeated.

Mary looked to the Doctor, but found no comfort in his eyes.

'It's the only way to bring these events to a conclusion,' he affirmed. 'This, **Mary,** is your Sydney Carton moment.'

Mary rose to her feet. With shaking hands, she popped the stopper from the **bottle. 'To** the Prince,' said Mary. 'God rest his soul.'

Six hours later, teasing the bones from an enormous pair of kippers at the bar of **a** well-upholstered establishment on Mercer Street, Sarah Jane Smith found it hard to recollect exactly how her supper at the Cremorne Gardens had concluded. She remembered how Mary had downed the contents of the bottle in a gulp; how the **mass** of inky figures had swarmed all over her body like ants on a discarded toffee-apple; how, instead of screaming, Mary had let out a series of impressively dirty **laughs** and given Anak a hearty thump on the back.

She also remembered the Doctor getting to his feet and asking the maitre d' to fetch a case of champagne.

But there was one image that refused to make sense in the cold light of a December Sunday morning in 1861: the Doctor, Anak and Simia belting out Rule, **Britannia** at the tops of their voices as Mary Prout stood on the table and peeled **down** her corset. And on the woman's back, Sarah felt **sure, was the most astonishingly vivid** and intricate tattoo that **she had ever** seen: the Crystal Palace, 9

sparkling in the summer sunshine; the arms of the house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, with the lions of Thuringen and Meissen rampant; Queen Victoria and her Prince Consort, in medieval dress, gazing into each other's eyes. The work was so fine that Albert's whiskers appeared to be moving in the breeze. Sarah resolved never again to drink champagne bottled before 185o.

The proprietor slammed a mug of hot coffee on the counter. 'Will the gentleman be coming back, miss? Only his eggs are starting to burn at the edges.'

No answer was required. The Doctor crashed in through the door of the chophouse, still a little unsteady on his feet. He dragged another stool to the counter, flopped down by Sarah Jane Smith and pulled a newspaper from the inside pocket of his velvet jacket. He pushed the paper towards his companion.

`Be discreet with that,' he said. 'Fresh from the TARDIS library. Isn't out for another ten days.'

The front page was bordered with funereal black ink. Sarah gazed at the date: 24 December 186i. The Doctor tapped at an advertisement in the entertainments column.

EGYPTIAN HALL, Piccadilly. Special presentation for Christmas week only. Maria Parota, the Living Panorama A Marvel of the Tattooist's Art. A singular tribute to the Lamented Prince

Consort. Gentlemen receive a cigar, gratis.

The Doctor refolded the newspaper. 'Shall we stick around for a few days and catch her act?' he breezed. 'I hear she's quite good,'

Jonathan Blum

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor

Christmas Eve, and I'm looking for Elvis to come flying over the horizon, too late **to** stop my house from going up its own chimney. There's a line of flames coming down the hill into Tuggeranong, racing into town like it can't wait to start chewing up more homes, and I'm thinking season's greetings, mate.

It's all a sick joke anyway, the whole Christmas thing they ship down here from **Up** Over. The Poms must be having us on. Fake snow and reindeer and Jingle Bells at **the** height of summer? In the middle of bushfire season? Especially this year, with **a** drought and half the Australian Capital Territory getting roasted on an open fire.

So, anyway, there I am in Lucy's back yard, waiting for that damn 'copter to **come** back over the horizon so I can give it any other four-letter words I haven't **tied** out yet. The fire department says it can carry ten-thousand litres. Well, too **little** too late, huh? Elvis has left the building.

I was out in their back yard because I didn't really want to be in their house — not **with** Lucy and her husband, and their kids waving bits of tinsel at each other or **something,** as if keeping their house from burning down was just an after-dinner **game** to follow their perfect little Christmas dinner The dinner they hadn't invited **me** for. Lucy and I hadn't even talked really since the divorce, when Sarah went **home** to Melbourne — it was obvious Lucy would take Sarah's side, they're sisters **and all, so** I just wasn't going to open myself up for another round. But now...

well, they were the only people for miles I knew well enough, really, and I just **wasn't up** to driving any farther. Didn't even want to be in my car, didn't want to **be reminded** I had everything I owned now in there with me.

So there I am, watching the skies, while some blond, curly haired maniac off of Humphrey *B. Bear* is running around helping Lucy and Jim get the place ready for **the fire.** I mean **it. This ratbag was dashing around** the yard in a set of braces with a cat badge pinned to them, and a pair of stripy yellow trousers looking like he'd **skinned** one of the Bananas In Pyjamas alive. Question marks on his collar and a **big** smirky roundish face that made you want to pop him one. Well, made me want to, at least.

When I asked who the hell he was, he waved his hand and muttered something **about all the neighbours from the other side of the suburb coming over here, to help** at the first line of defence. Then he handed me one end of a long piece of plastic tubing, and told me to fill the bathtub in their house and stick that end in **there.** And he disappeared with the other end of the tube into a little blue shed they **had sitting** next to their Hills hoist.

So I shouted at him, 'What's this for, then?'

He poked his head back out of the shed. 'A line must **be drawn,' he quoted, or maybe just said. He had** a way of talking like he was putting every word into quote **marks** anyway. 'A line must be drawn, and it shall be drawn here.'

11

Yeah. Whatever you say, mate. But maybe you coulda drawn it back there, at my house or something?

So I went indoors, having a good old stomp and grumble. I'd been too far out on the edge of nowhere, the fire department had said — they'd had to concentrate their resources where more people were threatened right away, but they'd be sending the 'copter to damp down the fire front as soon as it was available. And available was an hour too late. I couldn't fireproof the place all on my own, so I'd had to load up the car and turn tail, leaving the last signs of my marriage to go up in smoke.

Back in the house I switched on the shower and filled up the bathtub, just as he'd said. Mr Expert had us all jumping through hoops — while Jim was piling photos into the car, pulling the kids' paintings off the fridge and sticking them in the boot, Lucy was collecting every extension cord in the house for him. I reckon in all the panic they were just glad to have somebody around who knew what to do.

When I wanted to know how the hose from the tub was supposed to work, he told me the cat was hiding under the house, and I went wriggling under there to get hold of it and stuff it into its cage. Finally, past midnight, I sacked out on the couch.

In the middle of the night I woke up to the sight of his trousers. He was bending down right in front of my face, fiddling with the tubing that's running across the floor.

`Haven't you got a home to go to?' I said.

Slowly he stood back up. He turned and looked at me, all quiet, and before he said a word I knew the answer was no.

Òh,' I managed. 'The fire?'

He shook his head. 'It's been some time now,' he said, and turned to the window. 'Though I suppose I could go back, ifI really felt the *urge*... but too much has happened for me to feel comfortable there any more. People change. Places change.'

`Yeah,' I said, and tried not to think about Sarah.

He took a few steps away, looking half at me and half a million miles away. 'I'm sorry about your home,' he said, very gently. 'Jim and Lucy told me.'

For a moment, I was speechless, groggy enough to be touched. 'Thanks,' I mumbled. `More'n they said to me.'

`You haven't given them a chance to,' he said, dismissing it. But I could tell his mind wasn't on me any more. He was looking out the window again, like he could see the fire coming over the hill right then. 'Can you imagine...' he went on. 'Can you imagine a firestorm so massive it laid waste to an entire world?'

I snorted. 'I think I had one with my ex-wife.'

Ànd can you imagine the people who would accept something like that as necessary?' His voice was icy. 'A manageable sacrifice?'

Ì spoke to them, mate,' I said. 'My house. Those saints at the fire department didn't even —'

`They didn't start the fire,' he snapped, and I felt like the schoolmaster had just 12

rapped my knuckles. I guess he did knock a bit of sense into me — when you think about it I'd been blaming the wrong people. But it left me wondering what the **people** *he* was blaming had done.

`There *are* better people than that out here,' he went on. Almost whispering now, **almost** like he was insisting on it to himself. 'I like to think I'm one of them. That's **Why** I'm out here, taking care of things, rather than back there... that's why I can't **go** back home, even if they do want me.'

`Least you're wanted,' I muttered.

`Well...' His mouth curled.

I nodded like I knew. 'Burnt your bridges too, huh?'

`Less than you'd think.' And now he **is** talking to me. 'Not everything burns. You wouldn't be here if that were the case.' He stood up, heading for the back yard. Ìf **you** don't ever go back, it's because you chose not to.'

k, And he paused at the back door, looking back at me. 'The fire will be here in the Morning.'

I said `Muff and rolled over, which meant I'd probably agree if I knew what it **was**

makes

he was on about. This is why I hate waking up at three in the morning: it

me think. And this bloke sounded like he'd seen more three in the mornings than I could count.

Six am, and you could tell Christmas morning was gonna be a scorcher. Outside **everything** was muffled by the smoke — it swallowed up all the sound, everything **but** the distant sirens. So there we were, scattered across the back yard, buckets of **water** at the ready, wondering if that was the dawn we saw coming up or the fire.

1 **It** was the fire. You could just make it out over the top of the ridge, a line of red-orange like a giant hot coal. It'd been chewing through the nature reserve all night, **end** now it was on its way up to the edge behind the back fence. Once that sucker **made** it over the hill and started towards us, we'd have maybe a minute.

I couldn't help myself. 'Hey, kids,' I said, all sarcastic, and nodded up the hill.

'**Look** what Santa's brought you.'

Lucy shot me The Look — the one her sister was so good at — and just said, 'Don't **start.**' Which was just typical. That's what Sarah always went on about — who **Warted** it, not what you did after. That's all fine, you get a free pass to be a total **hark** as long as you

didn't start it.

Then the curly haired bloke spoke suddenly from right behind me, all stern.

Never mock the power of Santa Claus, young man.' Which was great, I haven't **been**

think

called 'young man' in twenty years. But coming from him... it just made me

back to 3.00am, and wonder what it was *his* people had started.

a But it was the kids he was looking at, and saying, 'They need their heroes.' And

'taw them looking all nervous, clutching their wet towels in the firelight, and felt **bite a** bit of a heel. Not that I was going to say anything about it, of course, but **When** he waved for me to follow him I took the opportunity to slink away.

h He led me down past that blue shed thing. In the dawn it looked like more of a bit than a shed, really, with signs on the top, something about police. But anyway, **lest** past it was this big tangled mess of cables and power cords — going 13

everywhere, one clamped onto the house's lightning rod, another disappearing into the blue but along with the water tubing, one power cord dangling loose which he was trying not to trip over. And a big switchbox at the middle of it all, which he handed to me.

`When I give the signal, pull that switch. Think you can manage that? Good.' I had plenty of hand gestures in mind to give him for that, but my hands were full, which I guess was the idea.

And he was off pacing along the back fence, following this line of extension cords. Every power cord he'd had them get from the house last night was plugged into each other — some of them wrapped in tinfoil or plugged into power strips, and hooked up to old TV antennas. He was hunting in the grass for the loose end of the chain, and carrying the loose end of the power cord for the box I was holding.

Beyond him, off to the side, I could see the firetrucks gushing away on

the main road. It was taking both of them to keep the blaze from jumping the road, from the nature reserve on the far side to half a dozen front lawns. But that meant when the fire came up behind them — behind us, up through our back yard — they wouldn't have a truck to spare to be down here with us. If they weren't ready and waiting for it, they'd never get here in time. And they wouldn't be waiting.

By now it was getting pretty light. He squinted up at the sky, at the little wisps of cloud in the sunrise. 'Could be a blizzard,' he said.

And that's when I know he's mental. Even if it weren't the wrong side of the year anyway, snow in Canberra is usually a joke anyway. Sticks for half a second and it's gone. Maybe it's just a Porn thing, it must always look like snow Up Over. But down here... Anyway, this is who I had to put my faith in? Santa Claus would be an easier sell.

`You can forget about Elvis,' I said. 'Jim says it's busy up near Belconnen.' The bloke looked puzzled at me, so I added, 'The fire 'copter. Scoops up water from the darn and dumps it on the fire.'

`Why Elvis?'

It was weird the way he said the name, like it was something from another planet, Gluvox from Planet Sniffleheim or something. Or a kids' show character, like Captain Feathersword.

`Yeah. They bought it from the Memphis fire department, y' see, and... well, he's the star of the hour, isn't he. Even though he's been dead useless for years.' It was all spilling out of me now. 'It's like the way people saw him bulging out of his jumpsuit and thought he was the second coming. People are just raving about it.

But I've got a pile of ash down south tells me the good guys don't win like that. You go and believe like the kids if you want to. But if any flying fat man thinks he can make everything all right, you know he's just wrong.'

And he just glowered a bit, looked down at his own waistline, then looked down his nose at me and said, 'Ho, ho, ho.'

I felt like pond scum anyway, but even more when I looked away from him and saw the others, spread out along the fence. The kids with their little buckets of water and big serious eyes, Lucy hovering ready to snatch them away to the car the 14

minute things really got dangerous. Jim with a death-grip on the

garden hose. And **1** see how scared they are, and how much they aren't talking. And this guy, who's been through I can't even imagine what, who's still out there helping them. The worst part of hearing myself rant at this guy was it was making me think, about the free pass I'd been giving myself with everybody since Sarah left. And... well, guilt Makes my head hurt.

And then they were all pointing, and I turned back and saw the line of burning **grass** moving down the hill toward us. The curly haired guy gave me one last look **nod** said, 'Well, I hope your cynicism makes you fireproof, because here we go.'

Everybody's The wall of fire came down the hill at us steady and quick. Nobody moved, eyes were glued to it. One of the firetrucks in the street was backing **up,** trying to reach us, but it wouldn't get here fast enough.

The last tree, maybe 15, twenty metres away, just went up. Just like that. Dry gaming grass creeping up, the first stray sparks landing on the rail fence. And the **curly** haired bloke had the end of the power cord to my box in his hand, and was **walking** towards the extension cord ahead. Towards the fire.

Now, I want you to picture it.

Slowly — everything's slowly all of a sudden — he's walking up to the smoking tre

e. Like he's trying to stare it down.

'Hello there,' he says. Talking to the fire like it's a wild animal. His eyes are gle**aming,** he's moving like a cat. For a moment I get the sense that he's going to m it.

'It's you again, isn't it,' he says. 'I've seen blazes like you claim whole worlds...

because someone or other thought it was *necessary.'*

He stands there, between me and the fire. A couple of stray sparks blow round **him,** not daring to land on him, like they're afraid of the tongue lashing they'd get.

4. 'And

all

perhaps they're right. Perhaps it's all part of the cycle. Change and decay is

around, I see. But once in a while, just because I can... Once in a while, it's **slough...**'

And he picks up the other extension cord from the ground.

'.. just to put...'

He jams the plug into the socket.

'... the fire...'

And he raises his hand and looks the fire in the eye.

` ... out.'

4, And he brings his hand down and I pull the switch, and there's a whoosh and a

*d and a rumble like a thunder machine. And he's standing there against the **mes** and I can't look cause there's sleet stinging my eyes, a whirlwind spitting tops of freezing rain right at me. I slam my eyes shut and throw up my hands, I'm **kiting** pummelled. But I get a glimpse of him just standing there, against the wind, lid **I** can see this huge column of dust and water whipping all round that but like

*whirlwind, spraying these icy needles at everything in sight. It's spiralling up **into the** sky like a cyclone. Up and up, like it's gonna freeze the whole sky... I just abet look.

15

Finally I feel it stop. I just stand there cringing, like a cat caught in the washer on the spin cycle. I'm soaking, freezing cold. Cold, not hot. I force my eyes open, and the fire's gone. It's just gone. Just him, standing there, shaking the rainstorm out of his hair.

Then I look a couple of blocks away, and he hasn't put the fire out after all. It's still burning merrily away down near the fire trucks. But between them and us there's nothing but a coating of sleet and ice, all over the charred trees, soaking the burnt grass. He's beaten the fire back maybe fifty yards. And left a big soggy firebreak wide enough to keep it from getting anywhere near this end of the neighbourhood.

I look up, and straight up in the sky, right over that little blue hut,

those little wispy clouds are starting to swirl together and get darker, like he'd seeded them with rain. And the but itself has *icicles* hanging from the sign on top, and a light little dusting of snow sitting in the niches on the doors.

So the kids are cheering and Jim and Lucy just sort of collapse on each other, and I look at the guy with my mouth doing the goldfish thing. He smiles, and it's that full-on kind of smug you get when you know you really *are* just amazing.

Èndothermic reaction,' he says, like that answers anything, and pats the side of the but like it's a trusty old Ute. 'And an induction loop to direct it.' And he points to all the extension cords round the place. So I ask him if that's what he had me do that thing with the bathtub and the tubing for, and he says the bathtub water was just to prime the dispersal thingy. And I ask where all the other water came from, and he just waves a hand and says, 'Oh, the swimming pool in there was leaking anyway.'

I want to ask him more, but suddenly it's too loud to speak, because that's when that fat 'copter comes over the hill. Still typical really, too little too late for us... but not for the folks on the other side. The firemen in the truck that was heading for us — who've been sitting there gaping and scraping the ice from their windshield

— kick it into reverse and head back to the others, where they hook up with Elvis and start dousing everything in sight. And I reckon never mind us, they can have a hero of their own. Doesn't have to be the same hero all the time.

The curly haired bloke is shrugging it off already, and he pokes his head back into the but to start dismantling whatever it is he's got in there. But before he does, he grabs my hand, looks me in the eye, and says, 'Thank you very much.'

I don't think he even realised it, really.

But, anyway, I go back inside with the others. Jim's brought the suitcase with the presents in it back from the car, and the kids are bouncing off the walls, waving gifts around and watching A Wiggly Christmas or something. I talk to Lucy, and say I' m sorry for being a total slimebucket to the kids about Santa, and she says never mind and thanks for helping out. A lot of people would have left, she says. I say I'll have to be talking to the insurance people today, and she tells me that if I'm back by five I can help them make a start on the

leftovers. And I tell her I didn't think she'd want me sticking around, and she tells me I'm a lummox and tosses me the spare key.

And then I say her friend out back is a raving nutter, and Jim says to me I thought i6

he was with you, and she says, nah, she thought he was from down the street somewhere, and by the time I get out the back to ask him who the hell he is...

He's gone. And so has that little but thing. Just vanished. Nothing but flattened **grass,** and a square outline of frost round where it stood.

And I look up at the clouds, and damn it if it doesn't look like snow.

•4

17

The Feast

Stewart Sheargold

An Adventure of the *Second* Doctor,

with Ben Jackson and Polly Wright

It was snowing heavily, a white dusting on the windows of the black-and-white beamed houses, sealing them up with formidable cold. It thickened on the Cobblestones, mixing with the manure, and it fell gently but inexorably on the blue **police** box that had materialised out of thin air not a moment ago.

lien Jackson brushed a cold snowflake from his face, wrapped the large coat tight around himself, and stepped from the TARDIS. Stepping out into the unknown **was**

landed

like testing his land legs after time spent at sea. He gazed about. They had in a cramped alley, the crooked, dilapidated houses arching inwards to meet one another. Coopers' barrels lined the wall near a stout wooden door. Must **a** pub, Ben thought cheerfully. He could do with a drink. It was the simple things he missed, travelling with the Doctor. Oddly, this didn't feel like London; **bo** quiet, too calm, despite the dark hour of the night. But the Doctor had assured **en**

em it was, even if he'd been vague about the year.

He smiled, suddenly giddy. Could the Doctor have got them home? 'Come on

iit, Duchess,' he shouted back in his cockney accent 'I think he got it right this **e.'**

'Oh, that's smashing,' said Polly, stood in the TARDIS doorway and gazing at **e** drifts of snow. Her large, expressive eyes were, as usual, emphasised with ke-up. She too wore a sensible coat, hers fashionably striped. 'Is it really **Christmas**

h

she asked, her tone hopeful. 'A real English Christmas? Are we home?

tctor?' She turned to the man standing behind her.

He was a short, scruffy individual, wearing chequered trousers that were just too tort for him, a rumpled white shirt, a dusty black frock coat that had seen better **ys —** stitches bursting, pockets frayed — and a polka-dotted bow tie. He had an **Unruly** mop of black hair, and a face that could only be described as malleable, coking rather like a basset hound. His eyes however twinkled fiercely with intelligence and mischief. He shrugged on his own over-sized woolly coat.

The Doctor locked the TARDIS door and pocketed the key. Then he sagely licked finger, held it up, frowned thoughtfully for a second, and smiled, his features ddenly blazoning with warmth.

imagine 'Oh, yes, Polly, we're very close to Christmas. A day or two away I should

. The TARDIS instruments were very unhelpful but this feels like the late tenteenth century.' The Doctor frowned and his entire demeanour creased along di it. 'At least I hope it is. There was a bit of bother in the first half of the century remember correctly.'

'Does feel odd, Doc. No one's about.' Ben glanced suspiciously down the quiet, gloomy alley.

Òh, I expect they're having fun indoors singing carols, hanging mistletoe.'

Polly grinned at the Doctor's simple joy. 'Now, let's get out of the cold and see if we can find a tavern for Christmas drinks.'

Will this one do, then?' asked Ben, and pointed above the door by the barrels.

A hanging wooden sign with a carving of a fat, languid hare proclaimed the place as The White Rabbit.

The Doctor rubbed his hands together with glee. 'Oh, yes, indeed. That'll do nicely,' he said.

The White Rabbit was densely filled with large wooden tables and stools; oak pillars branched into rough beams across the ceiling. Candles in wax-covered pots lent small pools of light to the scene. Polly was instantly grateful for the blazing fire in the corner. A few tables full of men huddled around the warmth, clasping their tankards of beer tightly. They barely glanced up when the three travellers entered, just giving irritated shivers as the cold blew through them.

%limey, this ain't very jolly,' said Ben, too loudly.

Polly winced. 'Certainly not for Christmas,' she whispered. 'Where are all the decorations?'

`Hmmm.' The Doctor's eyes darted worriedly over everything. 'I have a nasty feeling about this. Be careful both of you, and watch what you say.' He quickly went to the long wooden bar. A robust man stood there, chatting to a regular. He had sturdy features, a prominent red, pock-marked nose and kind but watchful blue eyes. He wore a heavy leather jerkin, beige breeches, white stockings and buckled shoes, and a stained leather apron atop them. He looked up with an attentive smile as the Doctor drew near.

Ànd what can I be doin' for you, sir?'

`Three tumblers of eggnog, please, my good man,' said the Doctor, and gave the landlord his most persuasive grin.

The landlord instantly lost his smile. 'That sounds like one of 'em fancy drinks you might find up in them new coffee houses. Got nothin' fancy like that, sir.' He placed his hand on the beer pump. 'It's ale or spirits.' He paused. 'We're not decadent 'ere, sir,' he added, forthrightly.

Ì see,' replied the Doctor, giving his impish, knowing smile.

`Not decadent?' said Polly. 'But it's Christmas! That's the whole point of it!'

The landlord reeled back. 'I won't have no talk like that 'ere, miss. I'm a good Christian, I am, and me family too.' There was muttering from the patrons behind them.

"Ere mate, be reasonable,' put in Ben, 'we just want a drink. To celebrate.'

`Celebrate... what?' asked the landlord guardedly.

Àh, a homecoming,' the Doctor said hurriedly. 'Yes, my two friends have been abroad. They're not exactly familiar with *current* events.'

The landlord seemed mollified by the Doctor's explanation, and leaned in to whisper, 'Then you'd best inform 'em, sir, otherwise they might put a foot wrong in this day an' age.' He placed his hand on the pump again, ready for business.

`Now, what can I pour for your celebrations?'

Ben jumped in. 'Three tumblers of rum, mate,' he said, grinning broadly.

The Doctor began to protest. 'Actually, I'll just have a wat—' A hand fell on his shoulder. He looked at it and then followed it up to the intricate livery on the leather jerkin, and finally the thunderous grey face of the helmeted man. He was evidently a guard of some sort. He must have come from a dim corner of the tavern. He was joined by two similarly attired colleagues.

'It disturbs me, sir, that I have been hearing some mention of Christmas '

Òh, that was just a silly slip of the tongue. No harm done, is there?' The Doctor tried his most abject expression, hang dog.

Òn the contrary, we cannot have people flouting the Lord Protector's rules.' His hand tightened on the Doctor's shoulder.

`But my friends were ignorant of this custom!' cried the Doctor petulantly.

Ìgnorance is not a defence against the law.'

'This is ridiculous,' said Ben. 'There's no law against Christmas!'

Polly clung on to him, to stop him speaking. 'Yes there was, Ben. I'm afraid the k Doctor's got it wrong.'

At this, the guard turned slowly to Ben. 'A self-confessed pagan?' His rat-like mouth twisted into a nasty smile. 'That was most unwise, sir.'

The Doctor's face crumpled. 'Oh, dear me. Oh, no.'

The guard gestured sharply to his colleagues. 'Arrest them!'

S**he** had locked the door and wedged a table up against it. She had fastened the widows

shut tightly. She had blown out all the candles, and now sat in a dark

*corner of the kitchen, in an alcove where Cook kept the potatoes and hung the onions

. Their long thin shapes on the wall were reminiscent of the hangman's Moose.

, Meg shivered, the cold of the slate running up into her body. She hugged her knees. 'He's not real,' she told herself. Oh, but he was. She had seen him. She had

,seen the thin claws, reaching out for her husband. She had seen them grasp him **husband by** the throat, and the thing in the black cowl hissed, with frightful glee, and her **had screamed. And the thing had pulled him into** the deepest night of the

'alleyways. Saint Nick. It had looked at her, and told her its name. '**I am** Saint Nick,' it Iliad hissed, like the coldest wind.

44 This is what became of those who did not believe in the good lord and the Lord otector. Perhaps Cromwell was right to ban such heathen practices; he had own they would conjure monsters, perversions. Meg had told her husband not be so vocal, to resist from a position of power, underground. But he had been bborn, dear Richard, and walked with his head high out of doors. Ì believe in hristmas,' he told her. 'It is ours to celebrate. No one can take it from us.'

But something had taken him from her. And because he believed in Christmas

, Tonight, of all nights: the winter solstice. The longest night of the

year, when

' rkness prevailed. The night that lasts forever ifyou're awake. Meg didn't like the rkness, always slept with a candle by her bed, but she was appreciative of its **rotective** cloak now.

Saint Nick, she thought, sounds fearfully close to Old Nick, the greatest heathen 21

of them all. She'd seen the red glow of his eyes under the hood of the cloak. She'd known he was coming back for her.

Then she was awake, suddenly, at a noise, and horrified that she'd fallen asleep.

There it was — a sharp scratching on the slate floor. Shadows prevailed, loosening from stillness to writhe on the walls. The scratching came closer, insistent, like twigs across stone. She screwed her eyes tight shut. If she couldn't see it, it wouldn't exist, it would have to go away and leave her alone. But that was a childish reaction. The darkness choked her. A stertorous breathing started up.

She whimpered and something hissed, a slow release of air.

Terrified, she looked up.

A black-hooded figure, leaning over her. Burning red eyes. She wanted to yell but her throat had seized up.

Ì am Saint Nick,' it said in a hideous, throaty wheeze.

Claws reached for her.

She screamed and screamed and screamed.

`Come on, Doc,' said Ben in a whisper, as they were marched through the cold empty rooms of parliament. 'We've done nothing wrong. What can they do to us?'

The Doctor gave him a glum expression. 'I think we're about to find out.'

The guards marched them into a large impressive room, the floor chequered in black-and-white marble, thick tapestries hanging from the walls. In the centre of the room was a vast table, scattered with curled maps and parchments. To the side of this was a globe set in a wooden cradle. A thin man in blue breeches and a richly detailed

jerkin, akin to the guards' costumes, slowly spun the world around. One of the guards went to him and whispered in his ear. He stiffened but his sober expression did not change.

`That the Cromwell bloke?' asked Ben.

`No,' said the Doctor, unable to hide his disappointment. 'I might have been able to reason with him. This man looks rather too... resolute.'

Ì' m sure if we tell him what happened he'll be reasonable,' said Polly.

`This isn't, I'm afraid, an age of reason,' the Doctor replied ruefully.

The thin man turned to them. 'Who are you?' he asked sharply.

Ì am the Doctor and these are my two friends, Ben Jackson, a sailor, and Polly Wright, an assistant. We are travellers.' The man nodded, storing the information, then quickly dismissed it. The Doctor frowned. 'Might I ask who you are, sir?'

Taken aback, the man said, 'You must have been travelling far abroad not to know.' He gleaned their reactions but found nothing. 'I am the Mayor of London.

I administer to matters of state for the Lord Protector.'

`Christmas is a matter of state?' asked Ben in disbelief.

The mayor turned his hard, narrow eyes to the sailor. 'My guards have told me that you enquired about it in a tavern. What is your involvement with this most profane custom?'

`Well, we know of it,' said the Doctor, smiling mockingly.

`Mentioning it isn't illegal, surely?' asked Polly.

The mayor snapped around to her, eyes boring into her with suspicion.

'Christmas and all its traits are illegal. Only a pagan would be so reckless as to mention it in public.'

`Look, mate, I'm not sure what you're getting at, but we're not pagans.'

'Indeed. Just simple travellers,' said the Doctor. 'We mean no harm.'

The mayor took each of them into his gaze for a moment. `So you would not be aware of the increasing number of noted pagan sympathisers who have disappeared over the previous days?'

`Disappeared?' replied the Doctor, worried.

`Just a few days before an illegal pagan festival.'

Àh. You think there is a plot to keep Christmas alive.'

The mayor gave a superior smile. 'I do not think it, sir, I know it. Would that it Were only disappearing pagans, we would happily be rid of them. But there is, I am sure, a gathering taking place. For a secret, illegal, Christmas celebration.'

Abruptly his manner changed, and he went back to his globe, a decision made.

"You three have the look of people who are hiding something. Your very mention **of** Christmas tells me that you clearly wish the practice to be observed again.' He **spun** the globe. 'I think it best to make an example of you.' He reached out and **stopped** the spinning world. 'A few nights in the cells and you will tell me what I **wish to** know.'

'That's grossly unfair!' cried the Doctor. 'We've had no chance to defend **ourselves**

!'

The mayor looked the Doctor slyly in the eye. 'By your own lips have you damned **yourselves.'** He motioned brusquely to the guards. 'Take them away. They disgust **41e.'**

'Well, that could have gone better,' huffed Ben.

v 'He had it in for us from the start, Ben!' Polly replied.

.4 **'If you could only** control that machine of yours, Doctor, none of us would be in 0

this situation.'

`That's not my fault!' said the Doctor defensively. 'I can't help it if the TARDIS

'Companion Won't tell me the year! She's been very stroppy of late.' He glared at his

. 'And you weren't exactly helpful in there yourself!'

'Doctor,' Polly calmed him.

The strange little man softened, his features crumpling into sheepishness, eyes st down. He glanced at the surrounding guards who marched them through the snow

, on a rendezvous for the prison. 'I'm sorry. I do seem to have got us into ite a mess.' Then his eyes twinkled cheekily. 'Though nothing we can't get out

.0f,' he whispered, and pulled his recorder from a capacious coat pocket. One of Ike guards eyed him warily.

WE 'Tell me, gentlemen, do you like music?' He put the recorder to his lips, but

'before he could blow a note

in

there was a great explosion of snow and mud directly

front of their passage. Everyone threw themselves to the ground.

'I 'Great distraction, Doc!' yelled Ben.

4 , The Doctor studied his recorder suspiciously. 'It wasn't me!' He sniffed. There as a distinctive sulphurous smell in the air. 'Gunpowder.' Noticing the stunned 2 3

guards coming to their senses, he shouted, 'When I say run, run!' He paused briefly, time enough for a second explosion to go off and disorientate the guards.

A voice cried out from the darkness. 'Long live Christmas!'

`Run!' yelled the Doctor.

The Doctor hared off into the dark alleyways. Ben grabbed Polly's hand and pulled her after him.

`Thank you for your rescue, sir, though I'm afraid I've lost my friends in the confusion.'

The tavern landlord nodded at the Doctor. 'I shall send some men to

find 'em.

We aim to keep the Christmas spirit alive, and all believers are welcome here. I thought you a sympathiser by your talk in the tavern, sir.'

`Doctor.'

'Ah, a man of science... and magicks?' He looked the Doctor up and down. 'You will be sure to value what we can accomplish this very night, Doctor.'

`Tonight? What happens tonight?'

`Tonight we thwart old Cromwell and take Christmas back.' He gazed about himself and then whispered, 'Through our consultations with the stars, and our alchemy, we 'ave managed to conjure up Saint Nick 'imselfl'

The Doctor's delight quickly turned to a frown.

'Poi, I think we've lost the Doctor.'

'Oh, Ben, what are we going to do now? Do you remember where we left the TARDIS?'

'It's all right, Duchess.' He hugged her, frowning thoughtfully. 'The Doctor'd probably go back to the tavern.'

'But I don't remember the way back there!' Polly sniffed away tears and her face fell. She'd faced terrors worse than this, but there was nothing so frightening as so completely losing awareness of her surroundings. She looked at Ben and he smiled anxiously back.

A bell rang out in the dark, the sound like a clear light to lead the way. A voice declared, 'It's one o'clock and all's well! Be reminded that Christmas and all superstitious festivals are not to be observed. Businesses are to remain open, by decree of the Lord Protector himself. Any whosoever defies these regulations does so on pain of imprisonment! One o'clock and all's well... Be reminded...'

Ben grinned, making him look like a naughty street urchin. 'Hear that, Duchess?' They began to follow the town crier's voice. 'We can ask him the way to the tavern.'

The Doctor peered around the cellar of the tavern. Coopers' barrels,

straw, shelves of spirits in bottles, boxes covered with hessian. They seemed the only ordinary things about it. The brass orrery that hung from the ceiling was decidedly incongruous. Strange brass instruments were laid out on the table — 'Talismans,'

explained the landlord. 'The power of metals is close to the power of planets, as alchemy is ally to astrology.' They looked like head circlets, with a long thin 24

telescopic point that would sit on the brow, which might have been some kind of focus. The landlord smiled at him, and gently angled one of the many sheets of plain glass that littered the room. Moonlight from a window high up in the wall, at street level, struck the glass, and it, in turn, shone a cats cradle of beams to the other mirrors in the room, until the room was criss-crossed with shafts of light.

`Very pretty,' said the Doctor. 'But what is it for?'

`Christmas has long 'ad ties with druidic rituals. The mistletoe you see aloft is not for kissin', but celebrates the solstice by causin' the spirit to enter you.'

The Doctor gazed about the place again and something clicked. 'Oh, no. You didn't conjure up Saint Nick! You've conjured up something else, an elemental force.' He gave the landlord an angry glare. 'You're playing with forces you know nothing about! This spirit has infected one of you, hasn't it? And he's the one who's been taking people, hasn't he?'

The landlord frowned. 'He has been gathering them, yes, Doctor, for this very night. But how could you fathom that?'

`This! All this equipment. Through some misguided venture you've actually been able to align yourselves to the stars, and something has come through.'

`Yes, Doctor, Saint Nick Imself! We conjured 'im this 6 December, the noted date of 'is death.'

The Doctor gazed levelly at the landlord, and spoke very clearly. 'Listen to me. I don't know what you've conjured, but it's not Saint Nicholas.'

There was a scream from above.

Ben and Polly had, with the help of the fortunately stumbled-upon

town crier, found their way back to the tavern. They were huddled around the dying fire, drinking searing rum from a bottle, waiting for the Doctor to turn up.

Òh, Ben, I think my blood has frozen.'

`Yeah, me too, Duchess. I hope the Doctor gets here soon. I don't half fancy a hot bath.' He started at a noise from the door. A scraping sound, like twigs across stone. Instinct told them both it was not the Doctor.

The door began to open. Polly stiffened and gazed fearfully at Ben. He motioned her quietly to the floor, where they both lay, peering up at the black-cloaked figure who filled the doorway. It shuffled ungainly in, the scraping sound echoing its movement. It was bent double with a hessian bag on its back. It wheezed and hissed across to a table in the centre of the room. It lay the bag down carefully and opened it, pulling it away from the short woman who was revealed. But something was wrong with the woman, her flesh covered with icicles. Polly gasped aloud.

The figure heard her, and hissed. Slowly, with the terrible scraping sound, the figure came toward them. It held arms outstretched and Polly could see that they ended in sharp yellow claws.

She screamed.

'Polly!' The Doctor scrambled to the stairs. As he reached the top, the secret cellar hatch was flung open. A figure in a black cowl hissed at him. The Doctor slowly backtracked. `So, you're the alien who has been causing all this trouble.'

It came down after him. 'What do you know of aliens?' it said in a throaty wheeze.

Òh, I'm well travelled,' replied the Doctor modestly. 'What have you done to my friends?!'

The creature gestured behind itself. Polly cautiously followed, holding Ben's hand. Four other cloaked figures, members of the druidic cult, came after.

`Blimey, what's going on here?' said Ben.

`Something I'm going to have to stop,' said the Doctor forthrightly.

`You wish to stop me from going home?' hissed the creature in what had once been a man.

`How can you achieve that?'

`This very night it is *winter* solstice, when the sun is at the greatest distance from the equator. There is an opening in the alignment of the planets that I can slip through and back to my universe and home.' It hissed at the landlord when he tried to interrupt.

`What have you done with the missing people?' asked the Doctor.

'I have feasted on their beliefin Christmas, which is a powerful energy. That will send me home.' With a claw he reached out and casually lifted the hessian sheet from the boxes. But underneath were not boxes but a cage, and in the cage there were people, their features rimed with ice, and a brass circlet with the telescopic point on each of their brows.

Polly gasped. 'But that's horrid.'

`You don't need to do that, mate,' cajoled Ben. 'The Doctor can take you back home in the TARDIS. Tell him, Doctor.'

The Doctor gazed deep into the cowl, as though he saw a face there. 'I do have a ship. I could help you get home.'

The creature was silent. It leaned toward the Doctor. 'You are alien too,' it said.

The Doctor gazed back. 'I do not believe you.' The Doctor's face fell. 'I am going home. I will feast on these men.' He gestured to the landlord and his circle.

`No.' Everyone stopped. 'You promised us our Christmas returned. You've tricked us,' said the landlord.

`You cannot stop me,' hissed the creature. 'I am Saint Nick, your pagan saint.'

`We are not pagans!' said the landlord, stepping forward. 'Though Cromwell would have us labelled as such because we protest. Saint Nicholas was a Christian, like us.' He glared at the creature. 'You are not our Saint Nick.'

The creature threw off its hood, to reveal the husk of a man with pits for eyes, sunken cheeks, and razor-sharp teeth. It quickly brought up a sliver of glass it had been holding and angled it toward a point of the orrery. Light bounced on to the mirror and then from that to the caged people. The circlets began to glow, and the telescopes shot light from the end, directly into the creature. The creature brimmed for a second, hissing with pleasure, then suddenly shot concentric beams from itself into every standing druid. The landlord was run through with a blade of light.

`No! Stop it!' yelled the Doctor. 'You'll kill them!' He stepped up to block one of the light beams. Ben and Polly quickly mirrored his action. But the creature simply 26

shifted, ever so slightly, and the beams re-focused. The druids began an autonomous chanting.

The creature hissed and struggled in the centre of the light. Then it began to blur and fade in and out, burning white, turning into a point of light to shoot through the planetary alignment, back to the stars.

There was a sudden great crash from the cellar hatch, and guards began to pour down the stairs, followed hastily by the mayor. His eye caught the Doctor's, and he smiled.

Ìt's not what you think!' shouted the Doctor.

Ì think it's exactly what I think.' The guards took hold of them all. The mayor took in the blazing druids, the people in the cage, the Doctor and his friends, and the creature hissing in the cat's cradle of light. 'Arrest them all! And stop whatever it is that thing is doing.'

The guards immediately began to beat at the creature. Polly turned away at the savagery.

`Stop the light!' cried the Doctor. He twisted free of his guard's grip, and raced across the room. Grabbing the hessian sheet, he threw it over the creature, cutting off the light. Having no centre to flow to, all the beams went out. The creature fell, but the guards, who had now seen its alien features, its twisted claws, kept beating out of fear. Until it was quite still.

The mayor walked up to the Doctor. 'Thank you, sir, for leaving us a clear path to follow.' He smirked unkindly. 'You will not escape this time.'

The Doctor squared up to the thin man. 'I think you'll find, sir, that I have just unmasked a druidic cult in the midst of some abhorrent pagan ritual, with no effort by your good self.'

The mayor faltered. 'What do you mean?'

Ì have been secretly working for the Lord Protector himself, to weed out ghastly factions like this under our very feet.' The Doctor glared into the mayor's face. 'It would be best to let me, these people and my associates go this very instant!' He actually stamped a foot.

The mayor wide-eyed him. 'I had heard rumours, sir, but never thought...'

`No, you certainly didn't. These people are good Christians. Well?'

Ì cannot let them go. They are known pagan sympathisers.'

`The Lord Protector has ordered tolerance be shown,' said the Doctor. 'Their celebration is ended, sir. That is enough!'

`Yes, but...' began the mayor. The Doctor whirled round on him.

`You dare to question the orders of the Lord Protector?'

The mayor considered. 'He thinks these all matters of conscience,' he said, begrudgingly. 'I do not agree...' He glared at the Doctor, but the Doctor held his gaze, unflinching. The mayor looked away, waved quickly to his guards. let them go.'

id'

The Doctor motioned to Ben and Polly and they each helped a person from the cage. They were disorientated and sluggish on their feet. They quickly left the cellar.

* * *

27

Outside, the snow had stopped. Polly turned tearfully to the Doctor. 'You let them kill that poor creature.' She sniffed. 'It only wanted to go home.'

Èasy *on,* Pol,' said Ben, 'it wasn't his fault.'

The Doctor gazed at her with those old, sad eyes. 'I can't save everyone, Polly. It has to be enough that these people are all right.'

Ì can't believe Christmas caused so much misery and resentment.'

Ìt won't be like this for much longer. Christmas survives too.' And with a sudden thought he delved into his tatty pockets and came up with a candy cane.

He handed it to Polly. 'Merry Christmas, Polly.'

Polly looked at it, and slowly a smile bloomed on her face. 'Merry Christmas, Doctor.'

28

Rome

Marcus Flavin

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Tegan Jouanka and Vizlor Turlough

Felix switched his broom irritably across the floor and then subsided. The floor was as clean as it ever was, and it wasn't clearing away the irritable feeling that was really bothering him.

The evening shadows were closing in on the street outside his small caupona.

Spring it might be but the weather was unpleasantly sultry. No one was moving in the street, except the young boy who usually hung around begging for small coins from Felix's customers. No joy for him today, and he sat disconsolately in the street against the corner of the caupona, playing idly with a small top.

Felix sympathised. Only one customer all afternoon, and that a notoriously stingy one. Not that the child would have had the nerve to approach him anyway.

Felix looked nervously at the table in the corner. In the dim recesses sat a thin, scrawny little fellow with a greasy beard, poring over a scroll. Innocent enough, but the scroll looked like magic to Felix. And might well be, for Felix knew the man and his reputation well. Thrasyllus, his name was. Astrologer, people said.

Magician, they whispered. Quietly, of course — technically you were accusing this gentleman of a capital offence. A gentleman who also happened to be a close friend, drinking buddy, adviser and teacher of Tiberius Claudius Nero. Tiberius, Augustus's stepson, the most powerful of Rome's generals, last year's consul, now holder of the tribunician power and generally seen as Augustus's heir. In other words, this old gent was connected. Well connected. Short of the Old Man himself, Tiberius was the Boss.

It didn't do to offend him or his friends, either. Tribune. Hah. Tiberius was meant to be defender of the citizen plebs against the powerful. That was what that office had once been about. Now, not so much.

Felix sighed. He couldn't really complain. In many ways, his life was as good as it ever had been. Freed, and managing the small shop for his patron — a not particularly important old man who spent most of his days on the little farm out In the hills. Better than the days spent as a slave, first looking after damnable brats, then — when his master backed the wrong side after the death ofJulius — sold off in a job lot, to spend the next few years labouring on a great farm, before his value as an educated slave had been discovered and he'd been sold on. And on, and on, until his last master had given him his freedom and set him up to run this little wineshop, a nameless caupona on the Aventine.

He had little to complain about now, he knew. But still, for the last few days, **he'd** had that feeling, that itch as though someone was watching him. Someone ho didn't like him very much.

And Thrasyllus wasn't helping. Well, he was buying wine, which was a good mg. Quite a lot of wine too, as he had every day for a week now. But Felix didn't 29

e the man,

d more to the point, he was dangerous to be around. Technically, he might be guilty of a capital offence. Non-technically, he was just trouble.

You didn't mess with the Boss, least of all in Rome itself. You avoided all that, unless you wanted to play with the big boys. Which ex-slaves with a small wine shop on the Aventine really didn't.

Equally, you didn't want to be around when the Boss was dragged into petty disputes. For instance, to be the owner of a wineshop where his counsellor had II

got into some drunken brawl. That would be bad.

Still, he bought wine. At least Felix had one customer today.

A shadow fell across his counter, startling Felix from his reverie.

An innocent, fresh-faced man. Strange. From his colouring, he was probably one of those northern barbarians, bizarrely dressed in white, yet his hair was cleanly cut and he was shaved, and he spoke in perfect Latin.

À small cup of wine, er, could you...' his voice trailed off and he gestured politely.

Felix pushed the cup across the marble counter almost before the gesture was complete. The man raised the cup, sipped, and raised his eyebrows.

`That's rather good actually. Not at all what I expected from, er, sorry, well, you know what I mean.'

Felix didn't take offence. It was rather good, and the usual stuff wasn't.

Something about the man, something gentlemanly, had got to Felix, and without even really noticing he had poured him a cup of the special Falernian from his patron's own vineyard, instead of the usual

rotgut.

`How much?' asked the stranger.

Felix raised three fingers and the coins slipped across the table. And some more.

`Have one yourself.'

Felix raised an eyebrow, nodded, and poured himself a cup. Just a small one.

Raising it towards the stranger he grunted. 'Felix.'

qjl

`People just call me the Doctor.'

Felix, who didn't really care, shrugged. Silence fell once more; but a companionable silence.

r

Tegan and Turlough were both hot and, though neither wanted to admit it, lost.

I Ij

They'd arrived in Rome the day before, keen to see the cradle of the civilisation that II

had laid the foundations for the most powerful nations of Earth for a millennia.

Frankly, it was disappointing.

For a start, Rome was a mixture of slum and building site.

Everywhere they looked there were buildings going up, buildings coming down, but none of it was quite as they'd expected. None of it seemed finished, complete, whole. Tegan had wanted to see the Colosseum, but as things had turned out they were more than sixty years too early. It was all just a bit too drab and primitive.

Nothing like the Hollywood epics.

Àll this,' the Doctor had told them with a sweeping gesture as they'd

first cast eyes on the city, 'well, almost all this, will be burned to the ground and rebuilt a 30

generation from now.' He smiled sadly, tapping his rolled up hat against his palm.

`But Augustus has said he wants to leave Rome built of marble. After all, he *isn't* to know it'll mostly be ashes.'

Of course, they were used by now to finding that Earth's history was not as they expected, and it wasn't just the cramped, crabby, smelly alleyways that made up most of Rome that were getting to them. What was depressing them far more was the air of fear that seemed to burden every passer-by.

Ìt isn't always as bad as this,' the Doctor had remarked, when Tegan had asked him what was wrong. 'Under some of the better emperors, I suppose the ups and downs of day to day life are no better or worse than at most times in your history.'

`They're all terrified!' Tegan had protested. 'Look at them, Doctor. Look at their faces. What's wrong with them all?'

The Doctor had sighed. 'People adapt to what comes their way, and for these people what comes their way is fear,' he said. 'And to be fair, Augustus isn't such a bad emperor, not when you think about some of them. But that's all to come: times far worse and far better, by turns. The older men you see around? They were born into a generation of civil war, when you never knew if you'd be caught up in fire and slaughter the next day. Mobs on the streets, murders in broad daylight.

Augustus brought an end to all that, yes, but as they tell their sons and daughters, those days could be only round the corner again.'

`This is going to turn into a history lesson, isn't it?' Tegan had said, rolling her eyes at Turlough. As usual, the boy had been looking shifty, keen to keep out of any argument. The Doctor feigned not to notice.

Àbout twenty years ago, just when everyone thought all the killing was over, Julius Caesar was stabbed to death out there in broad daylight. In the centre of the *city* at the heart of a growing empire that **he'd helped build and believed he ran, and by** a group of people he thought were his friends and allies. Before him, for two generations other dictators had risen and fallen. People had become used to adventurers trying to grab hold of the reins, keeping them in defiance of what the **law** said, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, but each of them claiming they were acting for the good of the state. Augustus — Octavian as he called himself then — was one of Caesar's junior cronies. When the wars began again after Julius's death he teamed up with another of his henchmen, chap called Mark Antony, and a pompous but rich chap called Lepidus...'

He'd carried on rambling off into the byways of late Roman republican history, entertaining himself and oblivious to the fact that his two friends had stopped where they were, letting him disappear into the throng of sweaty, surly people jostling through the forum. Tegan hadn't been too worried, as they'd agreed that, should they be separated, they'd meet at sunset in the small bar — caupona, the Doctor had told them to call it — near where the TARDIS had landed. And they were both sure they could find their way back to that.

Well, that was what they'd thought.

They were hungry now. They had no money. They **had** been up all night, both getting tetchier, more desperate, as they drifted from street to street, agreeing on only one thing. If they just kept walking, they'd have to recognise something 31

eventually. And if they kept going, kept looking purposeful, maybe no one would realise they were lost. Rome wasn't a place where it did to look vulnerable, that much they'd quickly realised.

They paused, letting a group of burly slaves pass by, straining under the weight of an ornate carrying chair, heavily curtained. The men, labouring in the heat, did not spare Tegan and Turlough a glance. Was it better to be invisible, Tegan wondered? The curtain drawn across the door, however, might have twitched.

Turlough must have noticed too, and grabbed her arm. She looked at him.

`That chair's passed us before,' he said. 'Earlier this morning.'

`Don't be ridiculous,' snapped Tegan, glancing back at the chair as it

disappeared out of view. 'You can't possibly know that. They all look the same.'

Turlough snorted, as if he knew he was right but couldn't be bothered to *argue*.

She hated it when he did that — dismissing the primitive Earth girl without a thought.

`Come on,' she said. 'We can't keep the Doctor waiting.'

Again, he didn't argue. They marched on. But Tegan was dreading finding the TARDIS again, even though with the other part of her mind she was desperate to do so. She couldn't bear the thought of what he'd have to say to them. Another lecture from the Doctor. And he'd be right.

The companionable silence between Felix and the Doctor was broken abruptly.

`Hey, Felix!' yelled Thrasyllus from the back of the room. 'Another cup, would you.' The astrologer's voice was already slightly slurred.

`Don't you think maybe you've had enough?' Felix asked, amicably.

`Never enough for today.' He waved an arm around, less majestically than he probably meant. 'Everything ends today. Everything begins today.'

`That right?' drawled Felix.

But the Doctor had perked up. 'What makes you say that?' he asked.

Ìt's all written in the stars.'

The Doctor turned back to Felix, as if hoping he could elucidate. Felix gave a theatrical, martyred sigh, and looked up to the ceiling, mouthing, 'Why me?'

When he looked at the Doctor again, the Doctor seemed even more baffled.

A pause. Thrasyllus struggled to his feet, and for a moment Felix thought he might storm out. His heart fell as instead the old man stumbled over to the bar.

`Wine!'

i t

r

With a put-upon air, Felix took Thrasyllus's cup, now being waved under his it

nose, and slowly filled it. The astrologer leant on the counter, his face flushed with excitement as he peered at the Doctor.

Ìt's true, you know,' he said, wagging a finger. 'I know whatyou think, mad and dangerous. Well, this is for real. Everything is written. All you need is to be able to read it.'

`What's written?' asked the Doctor, wise enough to humour him.

111

`Jupiter,' muttered Felix.

11

`Hall!' said the drunk, turning on him. Felix backed away from the man's 1

11'1

accusatory finger. 'Jupiter, you say? Let me tell you about Jupiter.'

32

`There's no need to —' began Felix.

`Yes,' said the Doctor, calm and composed, as though he was playing some game. 'Tell us about Jupiter. Please do.'

Thrasyllus looked dumbfounded, just for an instant. He snatched the Doctor by the wrist, and dragged him over to the table where he'd been sitting. He pointed to the table, where, Felix noted with a certain sense of outrage, Thrasyllus had been scribbling in chalk.

`Hey!' he said, scurrying over. 'I've told you about defacing this place before!' He didn't understand the obscure symbols, but he was fairly sure that was a good thing. They said writing could change the insides of your head, and that was probably more true when a magician was doing the writing. He tried not to look at the strange markings, and

turned to the Doctor for help. The Doctor was gazing at the table, spell-bound.

`You worked all this out yourself?' he asked. 'Just in your head, or scribbling here?'

Thrasyllus nodded his head with vigour. 'Yes, yes, it's simple. I've never understood why people make such a fuss about basic calculations. Three times in the last year, see, here, and here, and here.' He stabbed at the marks with his index finger as he spoke. 'Jupiter and Saturn met in Pisces. A fourth time Mars joined them, just a few short months ago. Now, in the spring of the new year, the moon meets first Saturn then Jupiter in Aries.' He slapped the Doctor heartily on the back and grinned, showing yellowed teeth. 'You see what I mean, don't you? Eh?'

Ì don't,' said Felix, cross to be left out. 'Not that I want to.'

`Very accurate observations, I must say,' said the Doctor, nodding, his hand hovering over the words as he followed them. 'And this bit, how did you work this out? And why does this follow from this?'

Expert to expert almost, thought Felix, with a sinking feeling. He'd liked this man. Knew good wine and knew when not to say anything. Now he turned out to be a reader.

Thrasyllus was gabbling now, seemingly unsurprised to find someone who understood what he meant. The Doctor took it all in, smiling like he had as he'd sipped his wine. Felix was soon lost in the technical terms, and more interested in ensuring no one else was listening. That little, ragged street urchin was sitting in the shade by the wall, but he seemed uninterested. Felix was too old to go by appearances though. He started over to the boy, meaning to kick him out of the shade.

`..

been blessed with two messengers from the gods,' said Thrasyllus.

`Yes, yes,' the Doctor replied. 'But you still haven't told me how you know any of this.'

`Very well,' said Thrasyllus, testily. 'I'll tell you everything.'

Felix stopped, just a metre from the boy he was about to kick. Was Thrasyllus really going to reveal all his secrets? That might actually be interesting.

`When I was in Babylon,' the old astrologer went on, 'I met a man who showed me the stars, taught me to understand how they moved, and gave me instruments.

He opened my eyes to the universe. And then, later on, I went to Egypt and another 33

man met me. The first one worked for him, he told me, and he'd been keeping an eye on me ever since. Told me he'd chosen me for my unequalled grasp of the science!'

`You must have been flattered,' said the Doctor. 'But he could have been conning you.'

`No, Doctor. The man told me things he couldn't have known, not unless he was what he claimed. He told me all his secrets and told me to find the levers of power, to put myself close to those who can change the world, so that when the time came I would be ready. I have spent my life building on what these two men taught me.

I turned all my talents, my ability to calculate and everything else, towards understanding the stars, and I began to comprehend just how to use the true, secret power to influence the world.'

`What did he look like? Not the first one. The second.'

A pause.

Èh? Oh, he was just a man. Urn. Tallish. But not too tall. The first, why, for a moment when you spoke I thought it was you, that he'd come back for me. The time is now, after all. But, no, it must have been a trick of the light, you look completely different.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Yes. Never mind.'

Ànyway, I understand all he taught me, and thus I read the future in the stars.

Anyone else... it would take them centuries to *see* what I see in these patterns, to reach this...' — his hand stabbed down at the table — `... from the information written in the skies. Me, I see the answers in an instant, and I tell you the moment is here... Do you understand what this all means?'

`Tell me.'

Thrasyllus leant forward, and whispered, very loudly, 'Change is coming. The age turns. The time is now — now, this very evening! — for men ofvision and energy to take us forward into a bright new future. And I have a friend with the position, the power, and the energy, d'you see? With my guidance he will rise to lead this new age. Together we will rule forever. All shall bow before us. Or they will suffer and die.'

'I was wondering whether suffering and dying would come into it somewhere,'

said the Doctor, and Felix was unsure whether he was mocking the old man *or* going along with him. 'So, who's first against the wall when the revolution comes?'

Felix's head whipped round at mention of the r-word. 'Shut up,' he snapped.

Àre you mad? You, both of you, stop this prating. Drink up and get out!'

But Thrasyllus was on a roll now. Àh, I've told himself already how it will be.

He's convinced. This morning he went off to see the Princeps to tell him he was retiring. Resigned his position. The tide of war will sweep over Rome, and we will be there, ready to take control of the mob. The new age will dawn, in accordance with our plans.'

Against all his better judgment — for all he knew it was suicide to get involved —

Felix was fascinated. In a whisper he asked, 'You told... him? The Boss, Tiberius?

To resign? He can't do that. Why would he do that?'

Thrasyllus gave him such a vicious glare that Felix quickly fell silent. It's self-fulfilling prophecy this, he realised. The Doctor was ahead of him, quietly, dispassionately.

`So,' he said, 'you convinced one of the strongest men in Rome things were about to slide. Don't you think, just maybe, one ofRome's leaders leaving his post, setting up a power base somewhere else, might be

the reason why things start to slide? Just maybe. And when they do, he'll be there to lead anyone who wants leading, of course...'

We've seen it all before, thought Felix. Only twenty years ago, and then, before that in our fathers' time. Blood in the streets. No one safe. The mobs roaming. At least these last twenty years there'd only been one mob. The Princep's Mob. These days he rarely thought of himself as anything but a Roman, though in truth his father had been a slave in Egypt and his father's father had come from beyond the bounds of the Empire, from Parthia.

The Doctor turned to Felix.

`Who else does Augustus have except Tiberius?' he said.

`The boys, I suppose. Gaius and Lucius, sons of Augustus's daughter, Julia, and Agrippa. But they're just children. Can't take on the job themselves. The Old Man will have to go back to running the whole show himself until they're old enough.'

Felix stopped. What was he doing? Engaging in speculation about the succession and the Princep's plans with a complete stranger and a man mired in the murky politics of the Empire. Was he going as mad as Thrasyllus? Still, in the end, a true Roman could never resist this kind of gossip.

Thrasyllus himself had turned back to his chalking. He looked up suddenly.

`Hang on. What's the time?'

Felix squinted outside the shop at the lengthening shadows. 'About two hours to sunset, I suppose. Why? Have to be somewhere?'

`More important than that!' he said, sitting back in his chair and heaving his feet up on to the table. 'Wake me when it's dark.'

Felix glanced at the Doctor, just as surprised as he was. By the time he looked back at Thrasyllus, the old man's head was slumped forward, and he was snoring.

Tegan and Turlough had found their way back to the forum a couple of times now.

Not exactly by intent. Pretty much directly against intent, really. The last time, it had been very lively. Important-seeming people were

gathering in corners, earnestly discussing matters of what seemed of similar import. From what Tegan could gather, the Emperor — though they all called him the Princeps, or 'the Old Man' when they thought no one was listening — and his heir had had a row, and the heir, Tiberius, was now 'on the way out'.

She remembered being in London for the general election. It had been just as exciting, as back-biting and full of intrigue as this.

The buzz among the ordinary people on the street corners, the ones wearing shabby tunics instead of togas, was little more illuminating. Many were talking of Tiberius as 'a real leader'. 'When he comes,' they said, 'we're ready.' Others were more sceptical.

And then Tegan, bored with being a bystander, asked, 'Isn't it up to the Senate to sort out? They'll find someone to replace him, *surely.'* She'd not directed the remark at anyone in particular, just wanted to contribute to the general argument.

To offload what bits of the Doctor's history lesson she had unwittingly taken in.

They looked at her strangely and edged away. 'I mean, I know he's an emperor now and everything, but he still calls the Senate. He should listen to them; they should elect a replacement. That's the sensible way. Surely that's what he'll do.'

`Tegan...' muttered Turlough. He never liked drawing attention, preferred to be invisible. But people were watching them now, sizing them both up.

Most of the crowd around them had edged away further, but one or two had taken up her idea and started discussing it. Some were for going back to what they called 'the old days'. The arguments began anew, more angrily this time. She'd stirred up a hornet's nest, and the buzzing was growing louder with every minute that passed.

Turlough dragged Tegan away before she could say anything else. She'd begun to say something about slaves, though fortunately no one had caught that.

`Why did you do that?' she said. 'I was just getting started.'

`Yes,' said Turlough. 'I was afraid someone might finish you first.

We're strangers here, Tegan. We have to keep out of local politics, at least until we've found the Doctor again.'

She demurred, cross that once again he was right. They were still lost, and that had to be their first priority. She let him lead her onwards, out of the forum and down streets they didn't think they had tried before. Every so often they caught sight of a building they thought they recognised and made their way towards it, only to find that it was something else, or that the street they were on didn't go the way they thought it did.

They found themselves in a small square, quiet and calm after busy streets, away from the press of people. It was late afternoon, and the crowds had gradually thinned. Set down in a corner was a curtained carrying chair.

`Look,' said Tegan.

'So what?' said Turlough, probably only thinking of where their next meal was coming from.

Ì' m sure it's the chair that passed us earlier!'

Turlough sighed. `So?'

Then he grabbed her arm, and hurried her into the shadows at the edge of the square.

Emerging from behind the chair was a tall man, wearing a smart tunic, and with an air of restrained wealth about him. He had seen them, looked right at them.

Across the square his four bearers sat in the shade against the wall, watching incuriously.

`Good day,' he called out. 'You seem lost. Can I help?'

Turlough said nothing. He didn't trust people at the best of times, Tegan knew, and he wouldn't be convinced that wealthy Romans would happily go out of their way to help those in need. Particularly not when those in need were clearly not in a position to return the favour.

So, mostly because it would aggravate her companion, Tegan stepped

forward.

`We need to find our way back to the Aventine,' she said. 'Our... guardian will be looking for us.'

Àh, well, perhaps I can help you. Allow me to introduce myself. I am known as Sextus. Sextus Cornelius, a traveller, nothing more. At least... in this place. And time. And you, what do you call yourselves? Here. And Now.'

They gazed at him, mystified. He was not someone Tegan had ever met before, not in all her travels. The man appeared human, not that that really counted for much. But his hints were broad enough. He knew what — in some sense — they were. There seemed little point in pretending.

`Tegan. And Turlough,' she stammered.

Ànd this guardian you mention, who is he? Some eminent notable of this fine city perhaps... but I think not.'

Turlough's kick came too late to stop her saying, 'Oh, we call him the Doctor.'

A broad smile appeared on Sextus's face. Àh. The Doctor. I think I know of the gentleman you mean. We've never met, but in our community, well, word gets around, you know?'

He smiled, wolfishly. 'Now. The Aventine you say. Whereabouts?'

Felix and the Doctor looked down at the snoring astrologer. His wine had spilled across the table, smearing many of his doodles into oblivion. One less thing to worry about at least, thought Felix. With luck, he'd awaken and recall nothing of what he'd said. And they would all be safe again.

The small street urchin was still asleep against the wall, his legs stretched out of the shop into the sun. Felix nudged him awake with the toe of his boot, not unkindly.

`Hey, kid, fancy an errand? Run down to the forum for me and see what the news is. Don't talk to anyone. Just listen to what they're saying.'

The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Actually, while you're doing that, I'd be grateful if you could keep your eyes open for two friends of mine.

They'll be dressed unusually and looking a little lost and out of place. Their names are Tegan and Turlough. If you *see* anyone you think might be them, could you ask them if those are their names? If they say yes, bring them back with you.'

The boy looked at Felix, questioning. The barman was touched that his sanction had been sought. He nodded and threw the child a small coin. Without a word, the boy ran off.

`So, tell me, what do you think of Rome?'

`Not what we expected. It should be, it could be...'

`Better. Oh, I quite agree, my dear. Some of us have ideas about that...'

`Who are you? Really, I mean,' Turlough asked, cutting in sharply.

Òh, just a traveller, like yourselves.'

There was obviously not going to be any more detailed answer at the moment.

The man had turned to talk to another slave who had run into the quiet square.

Suddenly his head whipped back round to them.

`So. As it happens, I now know where your guardian, the Doctor, is. Or was, an hour ago. You see, I noticed you all in the forum yesterday and thought you, and he, looked like strangers here. Like myself. So I asked a couple of my boys to keep an eye on him. Why, would you know, he headed straight for a bar? And one I've been watching myself for some time. Someone I very much want to find hangs out in there. Strange coincidence, wouldn't you say? This good fellow certainly thought it was strange enough to come looking for me to tell me all about it. Your Doctor and I seem to have interests in common. Is there anything you feel you maybe ought to tell me?'

Tegan looked to Turlough. He straightened his tie — a sure sign he was about to try something.

` We can't disclose anything without the Doctor's say-so,' he said. 'I'm sure you understand.'

There was that imperious glint in his eye she'd found so distrustful the first time they'd met. The traveller snorted.

`Really, boy. Try the truth.'

`We've no idea what you're on about,' said Tegan, before Turlough could drop them in it any more. 'The Doctor and we are... just tourists, really. Looking around, experiencing the place! We don't know what you're up to, but I swear, it's nothing to do with us.'

`Yet,' muttered Turlough. Like him, Tegan knew perfectly well the Doctor wouldn't stay out ofanother time traveller's business. He'd want to meddle. In any case, it looked as though they were involved with this traveller whether they wanted to be or not.

The man regarded them coolly, sceptically. As though he'd reached a final decision, against which there could be no appeal, he turned away and snapped his fingers at his bearers. They came promptly. Tegan and Turlough suddenly realised they were surrounded.

`Her in the chair,' the traveller snapped. Hands reached for Tegan, grabbed her before she could protest. 'The boy will walk with me. And do so quietly, if he wants to avoid causing suffering to the girl.'

She struggled, of course, but there was little use. Five great mountains of muscle were something against which either of them could do little. All she earned for her pains was a casual slap across the face. It was worse for being so effortless.

`Sorry about that, my dear. But great things are afoot. When needs must the devil drives, I believe they say, no?'

She'd heard the sentiment before, she thought bitterly, as a gag was thrust into her mouth and she was manhandled into the chair. In different times, different places, across the universe there always seemed to be those who thought that way.

And, she consoled herself, every time the Doctor put a stop to them.

Turlough struggled for a while too, but it was quickly made clear to him this was pointless. He followed in the wake of the chair, the traveller's hand firmly on his shoulder in what would, to a casual observer, seem a fatherly, protective way, 38

unless you noticed the whiteness of the knuckles gripping him. All the way across Rome he looked for an opportunity for escape but saw

none. He considered shouting for help, but that too would be a waste of effort. Who would help him?

The traveller would claim he was a runaway slave or something, and there was no one to stand up for him. No one except the Doctor — who they were heading to now.

A small boy ran across the street in front of them once, almost under the feet of the slaves, one of whom dropped his corner of the chair. Turlough heard muffled curses coming from within, and, despite everything, almost smiled. It took a few moments for the little procession to collect itself together again, and continue to wend its way through the crowds, thicker now as the afternoon wore into evening.

At length, he began to see streets he vaguely remembered from earlier and realised they must be getting close. And then, up ahead, he recognised the wine shop the Doctor had pointed out to them. Sitting against a wall was a shabbily dressed man, who scrambled to his feet and joined their procession as they passed. Turlough guessed he must be the last of the traveller's henchmen, left here to keep an eye on the place and those inside. They were almost there.

The boy had been gone perhaps three quarters of an hour, which the Doctor and Felix had passed in companionable yet anxious silence, with the aid of another small jug of the Falernian. They heard him returning a moment before he slipped in, breathing heavily. Felix realised he must have run all the way.

`The Boss is gone, no one knows where he is, and this man's friends have been captured,' the child burst out as he caught his breath.

`Captured? By whom? By soldiers?' the Doctor rapped out. His lazy charm forgotten for a moment.

`No,' said the boy. 'Some man, I don't know. He was dragging the young man along with his hand on his shoulder, and his slaves had a carrying chair with someone in it. I didn't see who it was. They're heading this way! And there's someone down the street watching this place, but he was dozing, I think I slipped past him.'

`How could you tell they were coming here?' asked the Doctor, though evidently impressed.

Ì kept an eye on them until they were quite close to be sure,' said the boy, with a deserved air of self-importance, 'and then ran on ahead.

There's nowhere else they could be going.'

`You did very well,' the Doctor admitted.

Felix, however, was less impressed. 'I don't want trouble here.'

The Doctor sighed. 'None of us does. But trouble seems to be coming to us.

Strange how often that happens to me.'

The boy said, 'There's trouble everywhere. Someone's been preaching republic in the streets. It's almost like Saturnalia down there, people speaking without respect and everything.'

Àlmost like Saturnalia, you say?' the Doctor said quietly, with a puzzled little smile. 'You know, that reminds me of something —'

But before he could finish, Thrasyllus began to stir and they turned to him. Felix nudged the Doctor. 'Can you at least help me get this old man out?' he asked. 'If there's going to be a brawl here, I don't want him drawn into it.'

'Of course.'

Together they dragged Thrasyllus to his feet. He was heavy, awkward, and tried to shake them off. 'I'm fine, fine, fine. The world is made anew and I am at the head of it.'

`Surely your patron is the one who will be the head of it,' said the Doctor drily, ignoring the glance Felix directed at him.

Thrasyllus cackled. Àh, Tiberius knows his armies, and the levers of mundane power. But it's me who knows how to access true power, the mysteries of everything. Until now, I've been hampered, never understood why things *didn't* work as I expected them. But with a new age the mysteries will be unveiled and I, only I, will know how to make full use of them, to access a fount of mystical power with which I can challenge even the gods. Tiberius will rule in name, but behind him, always and forever, will be me!'

He stopped, flickering momentarily out of what was becoming a rather familiar rant and back to reality. 'Hang on. Did that child say no one knew where he was.

Gone? Gone! Can the oaf do nothing right without me? Am I not entitled to one afternoon conversing with those who truly understand my worth?'

'I' m sure your day will come,' said the Doctor.

Thrasyllus seemed to consider. 'Yes,' he said at length. 'Yes, I think it will.'

He allowed himself to be led off into the back of the shop while, oblivious to them, he continued to muse on the nature of his new powers. Eventually Felix slapped a hand across the astrologer's mouth, as much to protect his own ears as to prevent anyone else hearing the treasonous gibberish.

Too late. Shadows fell across the doorway as someone stepped inside. Two someones in fact. One of them, the older, held the other's shoulder, apparently in a friendly way, but Felix thought not.

Àll right, all right,' said Felix as he hurried over. 'Sit yourselves down, gentlemen. What will it be?'

The arrivals ignored him. Both were watching the Doctor, who had risen to his feet as they entered. The older man broke into a grin.

Àh, yes, the Doctor, I believe!' he said. 'And you would be Felix. I've been watching your shop for a while, for the sake of that pathetic specimen in the corner. And now I find the Doctor here. What a strange coincidence.'

'Nevertheless, a coincidence it is,' the Doctor said calmly. 'I believe you have the advantage. And would you mind unhanding my young friend? He bruises easily.'

Ì do not!' protested the boy.

Ì'll hold on to him just for the moment,' said the older man 'Wouldn't want to lose him again, would we?'

'I assume you picked up the other one at the same time?' asked the Doctor.

`Yes, but let's —'

From behind the Doctor came a gasp. Thrasyllus, whom they had momentarily forgotten, peered at the newcomer.

`You!' he said. 'I know you. You were my teacher in Egypt. What do you want with me now?'

`Why payment, of course. I saw you were someone who might be useful to me, if I only developed your skills and interests in the right direction. Someone had set you on the right course already, all you needed were a few more nudges... Oh, do stop that, boy.'

Turlough was twisting and turning, trying to escape the man's grip while he was otherwise occupied. He was accomplishing little.

The Doctor spoke: `So what, precisely, is it you need this fellow for? What is it you can't do yourself?'

The older man smiled. 'Well, at the time I was hoping to develop him as a scientist. I'd, shall we say, lost all means of navigation. Needed some way of doing complex maths, far faster than I could manage myself. I've been stuck in this miserable backwater of time and space for forty years, you know. Have you any idea how limiting that is?'

Àctually,' said the Doctor, 'yes, I do.' He turned to the gibbering Thrasyllus, looking him carefully up and down. After a moment, he seemed to realise something. 'Oh, of course, he's a natural savant type, isn't he? Had a fascinating conversation with him earlier. Can do complex calculations in moments in his head, all that kind of thing.'

`Precisely. So rare in humans, don't you find?'

The two looked at one another. Felix, and no doubt the Doctor's friend too, had a sense for a moment that the two were more alike than different. They were like triumvirs, like normal men only in appearance, yet really many realms above them.

And then the Doctor laughed.

Òh, come on! Don't try hypnosis with me. I've won against experts.'

The man looked momentarily nonplussed, then recovered. 'Of course, once I discovered how close he'd become to Tiberius, some new possibilities presented themselves. Why leave when you can remake a civilisation as it should be?'

`Why indeed?' There was something angry about the Doctor's tone, something dangerous.

`With Thrasyllus and his master, I can rebuild this civilisation as it always should have been. Earth will develop faster, better, along the lines I have planned out. Still, since despite that, I need my transport dealt with too. After all, everyone needs an escape route, and I have a far better repairman than that freak now.'

`You do?'

`Well, of course. You're going to help me, Doctor.' He tightened his grip on the boy's shoulder. 'Or your friends will be made to suffer.'

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'This is how you ask for my help, is it?'

Ì feel it's effective though. If not, there are other methods.'

À simple "please" would have done.'

Felix stood against the wall, Thrasyllus beside him, whimpering slightly, the ex-slave desperately trying to hatch a plan. As the Doctor and the man stood facing one another, lost to everyone but each other, Felix noticed, from the corner of his eye, the small orphan boy duck up quickly from behind the bar where he had, 41

sensibly, taken refuge. In either hand, he held a jug of wine, each almost as big as he could grasp. Felix's indignation almost overrode all else as he drew his breath to shout. The boy shook his head at him and slipped out of the bar, silent as a ghost. In a moment, he returned, empty-handed.

He stood for a moment, silhouetted against the last light of the sun. Without warning, he picked up a jug and threw it at the back of the man's head.

It was a good shot. 'Oh, well played!' called the Doctor, as he dived to one side and the heavy jug connected with the back of the man's neck.

Not good enough though. The man staggered forward, but with his hand still on the Doctor's friend's shoulder, he recovered himself quickly. The friend, 141

however, elbowed the man and after a few moments of confused scuffling broke 111

away. The old man was left standing on his own. All of a sudden, thought Felix, the odds seemed so much better. He glanced at the

orphan boy, gratefully.

For a moment or two no one moved. The man, breathing heavily, looked at each of them with irritation. Àh, well, I suppose we'll just have to resort to brute force,'

he snapped. He looked out towards the door. 'Men! To me, now.'

But no one came. Indeed, the street outside was curiously silent, apart from an odd, somehow muffled, groan.

The man swore, and reached into the fold of his tunic, emerging with an object Felix didn't recognise at all. A spark, a streak of colour, and Thrasyllus was I.

staggering against the wall, blood smearing across the front of his filthy robes.

I. I I

II

Felix ducked behind a table, not knowing what terrible magic he'd just seen.

1 11

When he dared to raise his head, the Doctor was before the man. There was a blur I II

of movement, and Felix was never quite sure, whenever he remembered that day, just what happened next. But the man crumpled slowly to the floor, and the Doctor II 1

stood. Funny thing was, he didn't look much of a fighter.

`His men,' the Doctor's friend said faintly.

The boy giggled, from behind them. 'They're busy.'

As one, they turned to look at him.

11

Felix frowned. 'However much you took, they can't have had enough

wine to lay I

them out. Not yet.'

ICÌNot just wine. Olive oil. Big dose in each jug. Out all day in the sun, no chance to relax, running up and down the city. They each took a massive swig as soon as I brought it out. They were really grateful. Pretty much finished it all even before I 11

came back in.' He grinned. 'I reckon they're not feeling too well already. Certainly 11

not interested in what might have happened to their master.'

111 1

By the time they looked outside, the men were gone, the chair deserted. Tegan 1 11

was sitting inside, still gagged and her hands tied behind her back, quietly 11

fuming.

1

I

The orphan boy had gone down to the city again to see what had happened. He returned with the news that all were confused. They'd been expecting an appearance from Tiberius. Rumours had been flying that he was about to stage a coup, though many of the rumour-mongers were known hangers-on of his. But then... then he hadn't materialised. One odd little rumour gaining ground was 42

that he had been looking for his adviser before he did anything. Whatever the case, Tiberius had quietly slipped out of the city already, and off to Greece. Some were saying the old man was going to retire to a university. Or a farm. And grow olives.

Or raise goats. Or maybe raise an army. But this last was said with a laugh and a shrug, the boy said. Not as something people took seriously. As they might have done only a couple of hours before.

Ìmagine Tiberius leading the mob against the palace and taking charge.' Felix laughed. It seemed ridiculous now.

Thrasyllus, still sitting inside, glared at him. He'd demanded another cup, to calm his nerves. Whatever magic the man had hit him with had made him sick, but though there was a burnt whiff about him he seemed to be okay. The small boy stood by Felix, staring at the astrologer, not quite daring to ask whether he had used his own magic to deflect the blow.

Òh, for heaven's sake, throw that child out, Felix,' snapped Thrasyllus, pulling at the cloth they'd wrapped round his shoulder.

No one moved, and the silence in the bar took on a somewhat menacing air. And Felix suddenly realised that Thrasyllus was now friendless, and not nearly as intimidating as he had been.

`Haven't you a boat to catch, a boss to find?' he asked, coldly.

'Eh?' said the astrologer, not meeting his eye.

`Get a fast horse to Ostia and you might just catch him. Though what you want with a patron who runs out on you when you most need him is beyond me.'

The astrologer looked up, and then out at the darkening sky. Mustering what dignity still remained to him, he got to his feet.

`So,' he said. 'The time has come. Goodbye. Perhaps I'll remember you, when we come back to our glorious welcome.'

And without another word, he shambled out into the street.

The Doctor was stood in the doorway — his friends had already left. Thrasyllus pretended not to see him as he came forward, returning the sheet Felix had leant them, the one they had used to wrap and bind the man before carrying him away.

They had said they would take him somewhere 'appropriate', whatever that meant. Again, it never did well to question men with power.

`Thank you,' said the Doctor. He nodded back the way the astrologer had gone.

`You don't think you're burning your bridges?'

Will there be trouble, then?' asked Felix. He was still unsure why, but he had a feeling the Doctor might know.

À little. Some rioting tonight perhaps, people convinced that blood in

the streets will make everything better, a few other people just along for the ride. But I think you'll find Augustus will be lenient this time. Sometimes, the moment you thought was the lever of the future turns out to be something else entirely, and whatever you do, life just seems to bumble along as it was.'

Was Thrasyllus so wrong?' asked Felix, puzzled. He'd thought the Doctor had admired the old man's conjurings.

The Doctor smiled. 'Your friend the astrologer is a genius, but me, I think he's wasting his talents. Still, he and his master will find soon enough that there are no 43

secret levers to power, not in the sense they think there are. The power to change the world isn't a great secret, you know. It doesn't take magic, and nor is it all about blood in the gutters. It's in the hearts of every man and woman out there, every one of them who's prepared to work, today and tomorrow and the next day, to make life slowly better, for their children, and their friends, and neighbours, and the people they bump into on the street. And it will be there tomorrow just as much as it is today.'

Hmm,' said Felix. 'There's never a straight answer, is there?'

The Doctor grinned. 'In the stars?' he said. 'There's only what you make of it.'

He patted absently at his pockets. 'Well,' he said.

`You're not leaving?' said the orphan boy.

`Yes, I'm afraid so. Things to do, you know how it is.' He looked at the orphan boy, and then at Felix, and smiled. 'You're letting him stay?'

Felix snorted. 'I think I can afford to give a bright kid like this a home,' he said.

Ìt's not charity or anything.'

`No,' said the Doctor sternly. 'Of course it isn't.'

He moved to leave, pausing in the doorway to look up at the stars. His mouth fell open in wonder. Felix and the boy joined him. It truly was a mystical night, clear and still.

Òut there,' said the Doctor to Felix thoughtfully, 'the planets move in

their slow, endless dance. How strange, how small, to think they dance for you alone, to show you the way to power over others. As though the universe would be interested in such squalid, petty things. So... baroque. The secret of the world isn't found in crabby little horoscopes about which politician will rise or fall this week or next. The mysteries the stars hold are far more profound than that, my friends.'

`They don't guide our destinies?' asked the orphan boy. Felix realised he hadn't yet asked him his name

The Doctor thought for a moment. 'I think, if the stars and planets, carrying on their eternal dance, tell us anything... well, it's that, in the end, what we down here think is so big, so important, is actually very tiny. That the really big things are the ordinary little miracles happening every day, all around you and all across the universe, that you don't even notice until long after they happen...'

And just as he spoke, far away in the east, as they looked into the sky, a brilliant pinprick of light shone out. Felix looked at the Doctor, his eyebrows raised.

À nova, a starburst you might say. That's what Thrasyllus thought would change everything tonight.'

Ànd he was wrong,' said Felix. 'It never meant anything!'

The Doctor sighed. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

They stood in silence, gazing into the sky. People emerged from the buildings around them, to look at this wondrous occasion. The street was soon crowded.

`Quick, boy,' said Felix, coming to his senses. 'These people will need wine!' He and the boy hurried inside to fetch amphorae. They were going to make a killing...

The Doctor stood for a moment, looking up into the sky and smiling. And then he turned and wended his way back to the TARDIS.

Set in Stone

Charles Auchterlonie & John Isles

An Adventure of the First *Doctor,*

with Ian Chesterton *and Barbara Wright*

A lot had happened to Barbara Wright on her travels in time and space. She had been pursued by mutants intent on exterminating her; she had posed as an Aztec god; met Marco Polo and Napoleon Bonaparte; and she had been shrunk to the size of an ant. Somehow, through a combination of strength of will and the help of her fellow travellers, she had survived each ordeal.

So, she told herself, she could cope with her current situation, squashed up close together with her companions, all hiding in a broom cupboard in Westminster Abbey. It was Christmas Day, though it didn't feel like it at two o'clock in the morning in this small, cramped space with barely any light.

Barbara heard the echo of a key turning in a distant lock. 'That will be the verger finally leaving,' announced the Doctor. A ray of moonlight came through a gap at the top of the cupboard door and reflected off the old man's long, white hair. It was too dark to make out his face, but she could imagine the look of irritation leaving his usually wise, knowledgeable features to be replaced by a manic grin.

He was more restless than she was Finally they could get on with what they came here to do.

Àre you sure about this, Doctor?' asked Ian. She couldn't make out his face in the poor light either, but she could easily picture his clean-cut appearance being ruffled by what the Doctor was proposing. Even now, having travelled with the Doctor for so long, Ian still questioned the Doctor's decisions.

Òf course I am, Chesterton. It's imperative! Barbara,' he said more kindly to her, 'please open the door. I think we'll now find the abbey deserted.' She turned the handle on the door and stepped out.

It was such a relief to be out of the cupboard. She would have felt even better about it if she weren't now due to become a common thief.

Ian Chesterton had been in The Slaughtered Lamb for only a few minutes when Barbara arrived. He ordered drinks — he still found it funny how cheap things were in Kilmartin, Scotland, in 1950! — and found a corner for them both to sit down.

They had been in the village for several days now and were getting to

like the place.

True, it was small and quiet — not exactly what they were used to — but after all they had been through it was a blessed relief. The Doctor had somehow arranged teaching jobs for Barbara and himself at the village school. It seemed there *were* some things they couldn't get away from.

The Doctor had announced that they could all do with a holiday, but he and Barbara had suspected it was more to get over the loss of Susan. They had become embroiled in the Doctor's life through professional concern for his granddaughter. Now they had lost their friend to the future.

45

Ian looked around himself at the pub, taking in its old-fashioned appearance, its exposed wooden beams across the ceiling. There weren't many locals in, this early in the evening. He turned his attention back to Barbara.

`Funny how easily we were able to get back into old routines,' he said. 'Barbara, I've been thinking. You know this is the closest we've ever been to our own time and place, what would you think about staying on?'

Barbara paused for a moment. 'You know I've been thinking the same thing. But how could we do that to the Doctor? You've seen for yourself what Susan's leaving has done to him. He's just not the same.'

`Don't you think I've thought of that?' replied Ian. 'But remember he kidnapped us, taking us away from our homes and the people we love.'

Ì know. We've all moved on since those first few days.'

'I suppose so,' said Ian. He would have said more, but the pub door crashed open, letting in the cold, winter gale from outside. The Doctor blustered in, muttering to himself as ever. He acknowledged a wave of greeting from Connor, the landlord, but ignored the drink that had already been poured for him by the time he reached the bar. Instead he hurried over to where Ian and Barbara were.

He was out of breath with excitement as he sat down.

Àre you all right?' asked Barbara.

Ì' m fine, my dear. Just fine!'

`Then what's all the hurry in aid of?' asked Ian.

The Doctor looked him squarely in the eye. 'How would you both like to take a sightseeing trip?'

Their footsteps echoed throughout the high-vaulted ceiling of the abbey. The last time Barbara had been here was on a school trip with a group of loud 14-year-olds.

She'd been too busy shepherding to pay much attention that time. Nor had she had any chance to look around at midnight mass — the Doctor having suggested it was easier to wait until everybody left rather than trying to break in.

Now the choir stalls and altar were silent, dark and empty. They had the entire place to themselves.

`Do you know the way, Doctor?' asked Ian.

'Of course I do, Chesterton,' replied the Doctor huffily. He began walking into the darkness.

`Doctor?' said Barbara. He stopped and turned back to her, almost dazzling her with his torchlight. 'Yes, my dear?'

`You're heading towards the Deanery. The Chapel of Edward the Confessor is in the opposite direction.' She indicated the other side beyond the choir stalls.

The Doctor smiled thinly 'Thank you, Barbara. I'm glad we brought an expert!'

He strode off in the right direction.

Ian came up to her side as they followed the Doctor. 'I'm glad one of us knows where we're going,' he said quietly. He grinned. 'My only experience of this place was watching the coronation on the box.'

From ahead they saw the Doctor's light bouncing around. Then they heard his excited voice. 'Come quickly! I've found it.'

46

The Doctor, when they reached him, was standing over an ornate wooden throne. The torchlight caught the gilt patterning of foliage,

birds and animals of various sorts.

However it was the base of the throne that had caught the Doctor's attention. It was a wooden box, surrounded by four gilt lions. The wood was wearing away, leaving little gaps through which could be glimpsed their prize.

`Doctor, I've just thought of something,' said Ian.

`Yes, Chesterton?'

Ì remember the story in the papers about the theft. Isn't this interfering in history?'

The Doctor clutched his lapels as a look of concentration crossed his features.

He looked round, peering into the strange shadows of the abbey, as if expecting policemen to jump out on him at any moment. Eventually he answered.

`Do you see anyone else here to steal it?' he said.

`You want us to do what, Doctor?' asked an incredulous Ian.

Ì think you heard me perfectly the first time, young man,' said the Doctor.

`But the Stone of Scone, Doctor?' asked Barbara. 'Won't it be missed?'

`That's besides the point. It is vital that I remove the stone at once.'

`But why, Doctor?' Ian persisted.

The Doctor shook his head wearily. 'Even if I were to explain it to you, I doubt you would understand.'

`Try us,' said Ian.

Òh, very well, Chessman, since you insist.' Barbara had noticed the Doctor usually got Ian's surname wrong when he was under stress. 'As you are both aware, the Stone of Scone, or "Destiny", was used in the crowning of Scottish kings from at least the ninth century.'

`Thank you, Doctor. I only took a degree in history,' said Barbara.

Àh, yes, sorry, my dear. Now then where was I? It was taken to

by Edward I. Since then it has remained beneath the Coronation Throne in Westminster Abbey, yes?' He put his fingers to his chin. 'What you cannot be aware of is the potential harm the Stone can bring.'

With a final wrench the front of the box came open, and Ian reached inside to take hold of the two metal rings set either side of the stone.

Ìan, stop,' the Doctor commanded. 'Remember what I said before, that you mustn't touch it? If you come into contact with it who knows what could happen.'

`But people have been handling it for centuries,' said Ian.

`Maybe so, maybe so. But I'd rather not take any chances with you, young man.

Here, use this.' He reached into the pocket of his greatcoat and withdrew a metal box roughly three inches long. On top of the box were a series of small levers and blinking lights.

He handed the box to Ian. 'Now remember how I showed you to use this thing, Chesterton?'

`Yes, Doctor.' He winked at Barbara. 'I only hope the gizmo works.'

'"Gizmo"? I'll have you know this is a very precisely calibrated piece of scientific equipment!'

`Yes, Doctor,' said Ian, and set to work. The electronic whine of the Doctor's device echoed horribly loud through the abbey.

The Doctor turned to Barbara. 'I think we'll be requiring the van now, my dear.'

Snow was falling, settling on top of the previous fall. Barbara sat at the wheel of the van they'd borrowed from Connor, the pub landlord back in Kilmartin. She had become intimately familiar with the vehicle over their two-day drive from Kilmartin, and now felt like the getaway driver in a cheap film. Hopefully, the police were indoors sheltering in the warmth. With the van's rear doors open, facing the abbey's north entrance, she wasn't very warm herself.

The whine of the Doctor's device came to her. She turned, and there *were* Ian and the Doctor, hurrying towards her. The device seemed to be working.

Concentric beams of energy encircled the stone, the glow adding to the streetlights catching the purplish-red sandstone surface. This was the first time that Barbara had seen the stone properly. It certainly looked bigger than she'd thought: about two-feet wide and a foot in height and depth. It would normally take at least two men to carry it, she thought.

But right now, the stone was hovering two feet from the ground.

They were a couple of hours' drive outside London. The van's headlights revealed a row of buildings speeding by, another small village dotting the At. Barbara changed down a gear. She didn't like having to do this, so eager to get away from the *scene* of the crime, but exceeding the speed limit could bring undue attention.

Best to look law-abiding. The Doctor had speculated that the authorities would be on full alert by now. She hoped they had missed any roadblocks.

The Doctor and Ian were sat beside her in the front of the van, squashed up close together on the two-person passenger seat. Ian was directly next to her, his knee in the way of the gear stick. They chatted idly about whether they were really suited to this time, with food rationing still on. She knew Ian was trying to keep her mind off what they'd just done, and she was grateful. The Doctor had drifted off to sleep, his head against the side window.

They passed through the village, and Barbara put her foot down. She could feel the van wanting to go left and had to steer against it to keep it straight. There must be wind as well as snow. Nothing to worry about, so long as she was careful.

The wind got worse. Before she knew it, the whole vehicle was vibrating. Ian looked at her, aware something was wrong.

Bang!

The explosion could have been a tyre bursting. She didn't have time to think, the van was escaping from her, the steering wheel wrenched from her hands. Ian grabbed it, shouted at her to brake. She must have responded instinctively. The van skidded across the road into the other lane. But it stopped.

For a moment, nothing but the beating of her heart. Then, on the far side of Ian, the Doctor opened his eyes. 'Are we there already?' he asked.

48

They clambered out of the van to inspect the damage. The night was bitterly cold, the darkness all round affording little comfort. Barbara clutched her arms around herself.

The back tyre on her side of the van was gone; just a husk of stinking, burnt rubber trapped around the axle. Ian soon had the van's doors open, rooting around for anything that would help.

The stone was still securely held in place by the ropes. Fortunately, there was a spare tyre and jack too.

Òf course there is!' said the Doctor, tutting at their relief. 'This operation has been planned to the finest detail!'

'I guess you'll want me to change the tyre,' said Ian.

Òh, I can manage,' said Barbara, helping herself to the jack. 'Thank you.'

The Doctor stood behind Barbara, holding the torch for her. Barbara worked, expecting criticism at any moment.

Ìan, hide the stone!'

Barbara looked up, wondering what had alerted the Doctor. There was nothing to see, but after a moment she could hear, in the distance, a car engine. Getting nearer. Ian hurriedly jumped into the back of the van and released the ropes holding the stone. Barbara was mentally urging Ian to move faster and the car approaching to be slower. Once the stone was free he quickly activated the Doctor's device and moved off with it behind a privet hedge.

Barbara resumed what she was doing, her hands shaking with panic the more she tried to stay calm. She turned the final nut and was about to remove the remains of the tyre when the car — a police car — drew up beside them. Its headlights shone brightly on the van, blinding her. Barbara and the Doctor turned towards the approaching policemen.

`Now, then,' said one of them kindly. He was a short man with a thick

moustache. 'Can we be of any assistance?'

The policemen were sweet, really. Barbara couldn't begrudge them doing a good deed in the early hours of Christmas morning for a 'young lady' and her 'aged father'. The Doctor only just tolerated his new role, and Barbara was terrified he might cause a fuss and expose them all as thieves. But soon the tyre had been changed. The Doctor shook hands with the men, offered them merry Christmases, and saw them into their car. At last they were gone.

Ìan, you can come out now,' called Barbara.

Ì thought they'd never go,' he said as he emerged from the hedge. The stone floated eerily in front of him.

`Me too, young man,' said the Doctor, patting his pockets. 'But I should say we should really be grateful to them...'

He held the van doors open so that Ian could manoeuvre the stone into place, and Barbara heaped the jack and what was left of the old tyre in behind.

Èasy!' said Barbara. 'Let's get out of here.'

`By the way, Doctor,' said Ian as they got under way again. Ì'd like a word with you about this gizmo of yours.'

`Gizmo? It's more than that, my boy...'

Ìt cut out for a moment back there — if I hadn't been quicker it would have broken my foot!'

Àh!` said the Doctor. 'I thought I heard that privet hedge swearing!'

Ìt's not a laughing matter,' Ian exclaimed. Barbara joined in the Doctor's laugh.

'Oh, come on, Ian. It's Christmas Day. You're supposed to forgive others. And we've got away with it.'

`My sentiments exactly,' agreed the Doctor.

Ian and Barbara returned to work for Mrs McGarry at the local school. The Doctor spent most of his time working in the TARDIS, but wouldn't say on what. He was gone from the cottage they rented

before Ian and Barbara got up in the morning and usually returned after they'd gone to bed. Sometimes he would join them for lunch at weekends, but he seemed to have left them to their new life, and they weren't ungrateful.

One day, some four months after the theft, they returned from a hard day at the school to find a note on the dining table: 'Please join me at the ship.'

They had talked about this day, knowing whenever the Doctor was ready to leave Kilmartin, they'd have to decide whether to go with him or not. They were torn. So nearly home, and settled into a new life and everything. Yet this wasn't their time, and with each day that passed the lies they told about where they were from, their families, their history... It became harder, not easier.

The TARDIS was hidden away in woodland just a ten-minute walk outside the village. They didn't say a word to each other as they made their way over. Ian stopped outside the ship, and rather than walking straight in, he knocked on the door. That was it, then, thought Barbara. The ship was no longer their home.

The Doctor emerged, smiling at them mischievously. In an instant, Barbara realised he wasn't yet ready to leave them. He had something else planned entirely.

The stone was hovering in the air behind him.

'I see you received my note,' he said. 'Now, we need to borrow that vehicle again...'

The Doctor had gone off to 'scout around', leaving Barbara and Ian alone again, waiting in the van. Barbara's mind was racing. 'I don't understand why we're returning it now, Ian,' she said.

He shrugged. 'Only the Doctor knows what goes on in that mind of his. It's not as if he did it for a bit of sport, though. He said the stone was "dangerous". I suppose we have to believe him, don't we?'

Barbara considered. 'I know he can exaggerate sometimes but I think he really meant it.'

`Me too. Though he really hasn't been the same since we left Susan.'

There was a tap at the window that made them both jump. It was the Doctor.

`Come along, you two. The coast is clear.'

* * *

50

The door was open. They entered the vestibule of Arbroath Abbey with Ian leading the way with the stone, held in the air by the Doctor's device.

Barbara kept careful watch, fearful someone would be here, would see them.

The pews and aisles were empty. The Doctor was right — they could get away with this.

They approached the altar — the most obvious, noticeable place to leave it. Ian adjusted the setting on the device, to raise the stone up to the same height as the altar top. As he did so, the beams of energy flickered... and vanished. The stone crashed down to the ground, and with an almighty crack broke in two.

Ìan! Be careful!' thundered the Doctor. Barbara expected to hear running feet any second.

`Let's get out of here,' she said. They didn't argue.

`There'll be too many questions, won't there?' said Barbara, when they'd driven back to the TARDIS. 'We can't stay here.'

The Doctor wouldn't meet her eye as he fussed with the ship's controls, setting them in flight once more.

Ìt would never have done,' he said. 'Being so close to your own time... It would have been worse than being centuries away.'

Òkay, Doctor,' said Ian. 'Whatever you say. But are you going to tell us why we went to all the risk of stealing the Stone of Scone, only to then hand it back again?'

The Doctor's eyes twinkled. 'Yes, I suppose you deserve an explanation,' he said.

Ìf you'd both care to follow me...'

He led them quickly, keenly through the interior door of the TARDIS,

down a few familiar corridors and into some unfamiliar ones. Eventually, as Barbara was finding her intrigue waning, they came to an unremarkable door.

The Doctor sidestepped neatly out of the way. 'Please, be my guests.'

Ian stepped forward and pushed the door open. He entered, followed closely by Barbara. As soon as she stepped over the threshold she was overwhelmed by a feeling of calm and tranquillity.

They were in a stone-walled garden, resembling the cloisters of a monastery.

The floor was paved with ancient-looking flagstones. The walls of the TARDIS had been replaced by columns and pillars, strewn with ivy and creepers, as if left untended for years. That was where the feeling of calm came from — that innate sense of great age, of timelessness all around them.

The Doctor smiled at their amazement. 'If you'd care to follow me this way,' he said.

He led them over to a stone bench in one corner of the cloister. Behind the bench was a familiar-looking stone...

Ìf that's the stone, what was that we returned?' asked Ian.

'A replica! It took me all these months to get it right, but that forgery could even have fooled me!'

Ànd I thought I'd ruined everything when your gizmo failed,' said Ian.

`Yes, yes. I'm sorry about that, Ian. I didn't want to spoil this surprise. Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes, at that twee little museum in Kilmartin, they had a 51

photograph of the stone and I happened to recognise it. Well, I had to see the thing for myself to be sure, of course, but it's really a lifeform from the planet Micah, a sort of psychic rock. Harmless most of the time, but if left within the presence of a strong mind it can transmit those thoughts to others.' He started to laugh. 'I dread to think what strange ideas it got from your monarchs!'

`Won't somebody notice?' asked Ian.

Barbara, however, was laughing too. 'I remember rumours that it was replaced by a fake planted by Scottish nationalists,' said Barbara. 'In fact, now I think about it, the stone was accidentally broken by the thieves!'

`Well, here it is now and completely unscathed,' said the Doctor. 'Surrounded by the influence of the TARDIS, it should only project feelings of calm.'

`Yes, I can feel it in the air,' said Ian.

Ìt's getting its ideas from the ship now, isn't it?' asked Barbara.

Òh, I should think so, my dear,' said the Doctor, nodding. 'And finally Destiny can be at peace.' He patted his fingertips together, the happiest that Barbara had seen him in months.

`But can't we return it to wherever it came from?' said Ian, wide-eyed with wonder.

The Doctor plumped himself down on the bench. 'And where would that be, Ian?'

`Well I don't know. You said it was from Micah or somewhere. Shouldn't we take it home?'

`Home?' said the Doctor, waving his hand as if to swat away the idea. 'You *can* feel its contentment, can't you? I should say that it's made itself at home here.'

There was no arguing with him, really. Barbara took a seat beside the old rogue, and Ian had little choice but to sit down with her. There was little else to be said, so they sat together on the bench, and let the universe while away.

Calm, content. And at home.

52

The Thousand Years of Christmas

Simon Bucher-Jones

An Adventure of the Third Doctor,

with Jo Grant

The Doctor operated the control to open the TARDIS door, and gestured for Josephine Grant to step out.

Ìf I' m right, Jo, and there's a little slack in the string the Time Lord's have tied to the TARDIS,' — the Doctor was referring to his recent

discovery that he could get his grounded TARDIS to work, only for it to be drawn inexorably back to the site of his exile like a yo-yo returning to a schoolboy's hand — 'then this should be Planetfall at Estringoki , on Christmas Eve, the greatest festival of the Famous Rift Pioneers. The human martyrs who first plunged from galaxy to galaxy, and joined the Milky Way to the Magellenic Clouds. People to be proud of, Jo, people to be proud of. A marvellous time in your planet's story.'

At this point in his lives, the Doctor wore the body the Time Lords had condemned him to when they exiled him to Earth: white-haired and patrician with the air of a dissipated eagle. Surrendering to the preferences of a more dandified incarnation, he dressed it in a scarlet-lined opera cape flung over a velvet jacket and immaculately white, filled cuffs. By contrast, Jo, a pretty UNIT operative who owed her secret career to her influential uncle's indulgence, and a basically romantic nature, wore the height of current fashion: tights, a miniskirt, a striped round-necked jumper, bangles at her right wrist. They were both, therefore, totally unprepared for a howling blizzard. Still less for a blizzard originating in the TARDIS and venting itself out on to the planet's surface, freezing in its fury. All around them the air was crystallising. In one move the Doctor bundled Jo into his cloak and threw her bodily back into the ship. His hand slammed the door control down.

Later, as the treatment for frostbite — a thin flesh-coloured salve from a gun-metal tube — was restoring the tip of Jo's nose, the Doctor stared up at the image on the TARDIS scanner. Outside, still and frozen death stretched away, snowblind and desolate. Despite Jo's protest that there was nothing worth hanging round here for, and that they 'might as well go-yo,' the Doctor felt something. A tugging midway between his old hearts. The ice sheets on the screen were familiar somehow, although he knew he hadn't anticipated them. He had expected a living, thriving world. Had he arrived too late or too early?

He knew he had to go and see for himself. As Jo watched, he began to assemble, from cupboards and wardrobes, tea chests, and marine store lockers around the TARDIS, an outfit of more-than-Antarctic bulk. Parts of it were fur, parts some futuristic, silvery, heat-reflective cloth: the whole was wrapped and fastened together with what the Doctor called 'an atmospheric condenser jacket'.

`You can follow my progress on the scanner, Jo,' he said with careful cheerfulness. 'I shouldn't be very long.'

Ì don't see why you have to go at all!' Jo shot back, looking genuinely worried at the glint behind the Doctor's Antarctic goggles.

`Just a feeling, I have. That there's something I've got to do. Something pulling at me.'

`Then I'm coming with you!'

'Jo, I'm not sure that's wise. I can stand the cold a lot longer than you can.

Besides, isn't one of us looking like an oven-ready chicken enough?'

`Do you really think I should stay?'

`Yes, Jo. Just this once I do.'

The Doctor trudged over the frozen plain. He was losing less heat than his protesting feet suggested, but his toes were decidedly nippy. Ahead he could see a massive pinnacle.

He'd seen the effect in puddles on a small scale — the water, freezing inward from the edge, expanding as it did so, drove a wave before it up into the rapidly cooling air, to freeze as it was forced upwards. The result was a spike like a fantastic lily of ice.

Reaching it he found, buried in the planet's surface here and there, frost-broken artefacts, splintered and crazy-paved with cracks. An atmospheric hover car, jury-rigged with runners and a sail frozen into a razor-edged triangle, suggested that there had been time to attempt travel, even as storms in the rapidly freezing atmosphere must have downed all air vehicles.

The Doctor wondered if there had been some central survival shelter, or a waiting evacuation ship, a big population mover. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cold, as he doubted he was going to find anything more than a plain of corpses. But corpses couldn't be exerting this peculiar fascination he felt, could they? And he didn't believe in ghosts.

Cresting an ice ridge, he walked smack into a memory.

A year ago

Once there would have been an admiring crowd composed of more

than shadows.

There would have been lumberjacks from the dark forest of Norn that clothed the slopes of Mount Cerebus as far as the fused glass of the first landing sites.

There would have been townsfolk from Hessebia, Mingolstrand and Vanin, up for the Estringokl goose fair.

Now the forest had died back to a sparse and frozen tundra, and the slow teeth of time had ruined the houses. Hessebia, Mingolstrand and Vanin were under the glaciers now

Only the ten-thousand crystal pillars that cast strange shadows were there to watch, as the great genetically engineered fir — the only one on the planet — received its traditional livery. The Doctor's hands moved precisely and quickly. He placed each bauble, each strand of silver and gold, as firmly as if determined by equation.

By this visit, there *were* no longer even forest animals to turn incurious eyes to his actions. Only the ghostly pillars, and the blank-eyed windows of the shattered houses of the township square. Nevertheless he came.

54

It was risky. The Time Lords were hot on his trail, and to make this detour to a planet he had visited before was asking for recapture. He could imagine the poor scribes and functionaries working to unravel his adventures back from his call for help at the end of that business with the War Lords. Peering and prying into all his stopovers, all his journeys, trying to make sense of his ramshackle existence. Even so, no matter how much his hands shook with cold or his eyes smarted with tears, he had an obligation. This year, as in many, though not all, of his previous visits, he had persuaded his fellow travellers to stay safely in the warmth of the TARDIS.

It was his duty, his promise.

As always it was Christmas Eve by the colonists' unheeded calendars, and the tree was finished at what would have been, had there still been a clock to chime it, the first stroke of midnight.

Now

Meteorites hit hard on the old hulls of the Mars Venus rockets, but

unsuspecting memory hits harder. Pole-axed by his past, the Doctor fell forward on to his knees, each knee making an impact crater in the pack ice. Shards of cold shot through him. His improvised thermal gear lacked the deep layering of his spacesuit

`moon' boots. While it was insulation enough as long as he stayed upright, nearer ground level it was not much better than a dinner suit. Frost started to form on his skin, and a thick white rime frost brittled his eyebrows.

In front of him, like a signpost, a black-gloved hand and chrome forearm stuck out of the ice sheet, the pseudo-flesh of the muscles frost-eaten away, showing cracked and scarred metal beneath.

Struggling, he regained his footing. There was something to this calling he was experiencing, then. It was no illusion of the wastes but a genuine psychic force.

Sometime in his past, he had given his word as a Time Lord to accomplish something here. That mattered. No one should break a promise, but it was easy to find excuses. For the greater good, that was one. For pragmatic or unforeseen reasons, that was another. And then there were the foreseen reasons, the favourite excuse of the Lords of Time. For who could gainsay them if they claimed to have foreseen dire consequences born from faithfulness? 'You must break your promise, and you'll just have to trust us why...'

And yet as they excused their own betrayals, they had no compassion for others.

The worst crime of the renegades in the eyes of the Great Council wasn't tyranny, or the banality of evil. It was that they demeaned the office and the honour of the Time Lords. It was that they stole and lied and cheated like little men, like grubs in the dirt of history.

While the Doctor had been punished for his meddling by banishment to Earth, he knew that his punishment for breaking his word would have been greater still.

Perhaps that was why the TARDIS had been permitted to come here now. For the Time Lords had come perilously close to causing him to break his oath.

He remembered...

* *

Many years ago

The Doctor held the metal creature in his arms as the last ofits life-oils broke open its joints. It had robotic arthritis, robotic gout; it had robotic old age.

Its years had been spent tending to its task, only to end ice-burned and broken, its work unfinished by decades. It was no more than a servo-mechanism, and its task, when seen from the lofty perspective of a Time Lord, was no more than an empty vanity.

And yet.

He suspected Susan would have found it touching: the child who made up names for the ship. Vicki also, naming the robots of the Rills for their

`Chum'bleyness. Even hard-headed Steven had kept his panda mascot beside him through all his imprisoned nights on the world of Mechanus. Can a man make a promise to a dying machine?

Can a Time Lord?

He had.

Now

Soon after his last visit here, when the Time Lords caught up with him and exiled him for his crime of meddling in, rather than observing, the universe, they had taken from him not only his knowledge of the TARDIS but also certain memories bound up with its use. Memories of some past voyages, and, quite incidentally, those of his promise.

So now he knew what he had to do, but not why it had once been so vital.

Nevertheless he would walk across a dead world and pay his respects, for another year.

Back at the TARDIS, Jo had a steaming cup of cocoa waiting for him, and the salve was healing his hands this time.

He told her of the strange old tree. Engineered and changed and rebuilt so its roots could suck goodness and water from the deep rock, warmed by the world's flickering internal fires, its mirror-needles

harvesting light from distant stars, and yet still a fir tree, still the emblem of the renewal of nature. He told her of the tens of thousands of ice sculptures surrounding it — people pillars, carved watching it in great concentric rings, a vast ice-amphitheatre — and of the stasis-cache with its time lock that opened once a year at this time. He showed her the hand he'd found, a frost-destroyed part of one of the robots that should every year have opened the cache and performed their pre-ordained ritual.

And he told her he'd have to go back. That he'd have to end it. If he left, he might not find this place again. He would have to see out the ritual this time.

Ten times the TARDIS hiccuped forward in time, landing always a year onward in the planet's long death. Ten times the Doctor struggled out, across the ice face, to make a gesture in spite of the long night. Jo came with him after the fourth journey: unwilling any longer to wait behind.

And in the eleventh year, the sun flared anew, at Christmas time, and there was a miracle.

56

The Doctor and Jo left quietly while everyone was waking, like parents tip-toeing to the door of a child's room.

Epilogue

Every year a dignitary from the Kringstadt, a famous thespian from the touring theatres, an ambassador from the Hub worlds or a Princess of the blood would come to Estringokl Town on Ossian Minima to dress the great tree, and light the Christmas lights. Every year for 900 years, in the worlds of the Tlanassic Rift Settlements, the Tree on Estringokl was the focus of their hope of renewal, of the religions and traditions they had bought from Ancient Earth. The Tree, a re-engineered Redwood-Pine, had a projected life span of a millennium. It had been planted when the first Christmas had been celebrated by the pioneers, and every year since it had been robed in finery at Christmas time. In the first decade it had been merely as tall as a young boy, but century on century it had grown, until now the lights were threaded around it by silver flying robots, and it would take a man a day to climb. Only during the great calamity, when Ossian Maxima erupted and the orbit of its sister world went awry, and the pioneers froze in their thousands, and the tree was a nine-foot dying

stalagmite of ice, had the ceremony seemed doomed to failure. Even then, as the populace waited in cryonic suspension around it, legend has it that the lights and dressings appeared on the Tree year after year, so that by the persistence of vision, it appeared to those frozen witnesses that all the minutes that they spent, in their slow time, were all a single Christmas

This is, of course, nonsense.

It would have required a thousand years of tree dressings, all precisely arranged to cover the gap, and archaeological work carried out by the pioneers, post-emergence from their Deep Sleep, confirmed that the maintenance robots left active failed soon into the hiatus.

Nevertheless the generation emerging from the calamity, acted as if the legend were true, and, building on it, achieved great things. Such is the power of stories at Christmas.

Cantic Tanlak's History of the Rift *Festivals,* Book Five 57

Presence

Peter Anghelides

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor,

with Dorothy 'Ace' McShane and Thomas 'Hex' Schofield

Times Square, New York, Christmas Eve 1975

I thought I'd have shaken the little guy off by the time I'd reached the neon brightness of Times Square. He'd been following me for an hour. Maybe more.

Easy to see him at first. Everyone else was stumbling through the filthy mush of half-melted snow, pulling their heavy coats tight around them against the bitter cold. Walking was the only option now anyway, with cars and delivery trucks and taxis gridlocked all across Manhattan.

My little stalker looked like he was wearing a safari suit, and his only attempt to stay warm was a knitted vest with question marks on it. I'd first noticed him when I was walking away from the Rockefeller Center. I guess that when you expect people to cross the street to avoid you, you're gonna notice someone who keeps crossing it to stay within spitting distance. That's kinda what worried me — that he

wanted to spit on me. Or worse. I'm a tramp, a bum. Of course, I've had worse.

But what could **be** worse today? On any other Christmas Eve, passers-by would have found it easy to ignore me in my filthy torn coat. But today they had better reasons for sticking their noses in the air. Half an hour ago, the first of those menacing spaceships had made its ominous, droning pass low over the city.

The scurrying crowds were buzzing with fear, even the streetwalkers were abandoning their corners and running for cover. They knew what to expect now, they'd seen it in the news. Last night, on the burnt-out tube of the hostel's old TV, I could see the dying images of the spaceships' attacks on Tokyo, London, Washington.

The little guy was waiting for me further down the road, stood under a shabby theatre hoarding that announced 'Live Show'. He was a still point amid the dozens of others who stumbled past through the late-afternoon slush. This time, I didn't try to avoid him. I just got a tighter grip on my grubby bag and walked right up to him in the theatre entrance.

`Henry?' he said, and raised his straw hat.

I wanted to laugh, because he looked like a doorman trying to get a client into the decrepit theatre. Then I thought about what he'd said. 'How'd you know my name? No one's called me Henry for a long time.'

Did he look embarrassed for a moment?

Àh, no. I said "hungry?" Not "Henry".' He offered me a snaggletooth smile of reassurance. 'I was about to get myself a bite to eat.' The snow was coming down **again, and after a** struggle he managed to put up his umbrella. That had a question mark too, on the handle. Maybe it was a badge, like he was from some charity for anonymous good works. 'Come on,' he said. He put his free hand around my waist, to encourage me along the street. I was embarrassed, unexpectedly 59

conscious of my torn overcoat, shabby trousers, filthy fingerless gloves. The *whole* stink of me.

`Who are you?' I asked.

Ì'm the Doctor.' He ducked under the ripped awning of a darkened coffee shop.

Two folding metal chairs, rusted and grimy, were chained to the grille over the window. He struggled with them for a moment, set them up, and ushered me to sit in one. He disappeared briefly inside the place, and re-emerged with lukewarm black coffees and curling ham sandwiches, each wrapped in newspaper. 'Sorry, this is all I could find. I'm sure you'd have preferred a macaroni and cheese at HoJo' s.'

`Beggars,' I told him, 'can't be choosers.'

He nodded. 'We're lucky to find anywhere that will serve us today.'

I laughed aloud. 'I'm lucky to find that any day, mister.'

`Doctor,' he reminded me.

`Doctor, then. You're not from around here.'

He sipped his coffee while another spaceship growled overhead. The crowds pushed past oblivious to us. I wondered if the Doctor was a kinda street person, a vagrant, unnoticed by the hurrying crowds. Car horns sounded anonymously in the distance. The open doors of gridlocked vehicles beside us witnessed that the occupants had abandoned them long ago.

Ànd it's a hell of a time for you to be a tourist in New York. You sound Scottish.'

`Do I?' He looked around the stained, wet sidewalk for somewhere to put his empty cup. There was no bin in the litter-strewn front of the shop, so he flattened the cardboard and put it in his pocket. 'Eat your sandwich.'

I finished it quickly. The first proper food in days made me feel more hungry.

The Doctor noticed, and gave me his own sandwich. It was wrapped in the front page of an old Daily *News.* When he unwrapped it, I could see the headline: 'FORD

TO CITY: DROP DEAD.'

I uttered a savage bark of laughter. 'That was months back. Do you think the president knew? Do you think when they hit Washington that his life flashed before his eyes?'

I reached out to take the paper from him, but he folded it carefully

and slipped it into his jacket. The Doctor looked beyond the awning, out through the falling snow. 'I don't imagine President Ford was just saving money. And I think New York will need bailing out more than just financially after today.'

`Why are you here? Shouldn't you be getting the hell out like all these others?'

`You seem to be asking all the questions. What about you? Is your life flashing before you?'

I looked into his eyes. I couldn't believe how serious he was. 'This is a guilt trip, right? An act of kindness so you'll get into heaven.'

The Doctor showed me his uneven smile again. 'You fascinate me, Henry Bergson. I saw you in midtown Manhattan a couple of hours ago, near the Rockefeller Center. I watched you from behind one of the angel illuminations. You were staring into a toy shop for more than twenty minutes before they told you to move on. I could understand it if you were gazing into a deli or a food store. But a toy store? Was that Meccano so very, very fascinating?'

His calm voice seemed to block out all the noise and commotion around us. I coulda been back outside that store again, my grubby nose pressed against the glass like a ten-year-old. I wanted to cry again.

`The chemistry set,' I said.

The Doctor leaned forward, placed his bare hand on my torn glove, and squeezed encouragement. 'Tell me about the chemistry set.'

`When I was ten, I got good grades in school. So my mom told me my dad would buy me a special present for Christmas that year. We came into the city, and I saw a chemistry set just like that one.'

`Tell me about that.'

In my mind's eye, I could see things just as they were twenty years before. 'The whole day was an event for us, my mom and me. She brought me here to Times Square, and we saw the Camel Man. You remember? That huge advertising hoarding that blew smoke across the street? That was before this place became so seedy and run down. Hah! Before I became so seedy and run down, I guess. Well, I

remember that chemistry set in the store. The names of the things in it sounded so exotic, so exciting. It had a galvanometer kit, and alligator clips. It had a poster of the periodic table like the map of an undiscovered world. There were samples of methylene blue, potassium iodide... And best of all, a bottle of Fehling's solution.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Copper sulphate, sodium hydroxide and potassium sodium tartrate in solution.'

`Yeah, the guy in the store made the whole thing real. Exciting. He said I could pee in a test tube and then use the Fehling's solution to test sugar levels. Today I guess you'd call it a diabetes test. Crazy thing is, diabetes is part of what killed my dad. And all those years before, he wouldn't buy that set.'

`Why not?'

`Said he couldn't afford it. Ten dollars was a load, back then.' I coughed another laugh at the thought. 'Ten dollars is a load for me now, I guess.'

The Doctor squeezed my hand again. 'The price of a dream?'

À little boy's dream. To be a scientist. Like I coulda done that, ever. Look at me now. Thirty years old. These people here are fleeing for their lives, but mine ended years ago.'

'It wasn't that he couldn't afford it, was it?' said the Doctor.

I shook my head.

`He just never believed it, never believed in you,' said the Doctor. 'It would have cost him nothing to let you go on some of those school museum trips, would it?'

`Folk aren't any more generous these days,' I told him sourly. 'You'd have noticed that at the Rockefeller Center too.'

He shook his head. 'You know, the man who funded that building once told me that we should think of giving not as a duty but as a privilege.'

`You must be older than you look,' I began, 'and lucky to rub shoulders with rich guys. It must be a gift.'

`Yes,' he mused. 'A gift.' Another spaceship scooped low over the

buildings, sending pedestrians screaming and scampering for cover. The dull sound of an enormous explosion rumbled like distant thunder over the city. 'It's begun.' He 61

stood up to peer between the scrapers at a grey cloud rising swiftly between them in the distance. 'The Kellenian assault on New York.' The way the Doctor said it, it was like he was reading a headline in the Daily *News.*

I couldn't look away from the ballooning cloud. 'They're attacking the financial district, razing the city to the ground.' The smoke reminded me of the Camel Man hoarding, when I stared at it with Mom all those years ago. 'I thought that New York had already changed out of all recognition.'

`So have you,' said the Doctor. But by the time I turned to ask him what he meant, I could *see* his rusty metal chair had already been folded up and propped in its place against the shop grille, with the Doctor nowhere to be seen.

Daily *News* Building, New York, 29 October 1975

I shuffled uncomfortably in the low seat. I should have chosen the stiff-backed chair by his desk, especially as I was in uniform.

`Now, these stories from my sources at the United Nations, Dr Bergson...'

Hartmann looked down at me as the chair seemed to engulf me. 'They say your new security team is a direct response to the so-called Kellenian project.'

I had expected this whole interview to be a 'colour' piece for the Daily *News.*

Instead, Hartmann had returned several times to these anonymous sources, and I was faced with denying them or lying about them. I could hardly tell him that the Kellenians were Earth's first contact with an alien species, and that my diplomatic counterparts had been in secret peace negotiations for six months.

`We've got about five minutes left,' I told him.

The reporter looked up from his notebook. 'Back to the strategic planning meeting?'

Ì could tell you, Mr Hartmann,' I suggested. 'But then I'd have to kill you.' He grinned at me. 'No, really,' I went on. Hartmann frowned, and now it was my turn to grin. `Gotcha!`

Colour returned to Hartmann's face. I began to regret teasing him. It was unlikely to deter his line of questioning. 'You seem to have secured a lot of government funding,' he persisted, 'at a time when the president is telling the rest of New York that he won't bail out the city from impending bankruptcy. You know what they're saying about that? The president is telling us to drop dead. So why the cash for your team? Is it UN funding?'

I smiled more patiently than I felt. 'Well, Mr Hartmann, I'm not in the habit of discussing anonymous comments. I want to deal in facts. That's the empiricist in me, my scientific training, if you will.'

The reporter sat up a bit straighter behind his desk. 'So, two months in as head of the newly formed New York Port Authority Security Team. And you've explained that the appointment wasn't despite your scientific qualifications, it was because of **them.**'

I sneaked a look at the wall clock behind him. 'Yes.'

`Why is your own postgraduate research project so important to Port Authority Security?'

I could see this was another way of asking me about the Kellenian story. It had 62

been a happy coincidence that my research at NYU had made it possible for me to persuade a sceptical Government that the Kellenian invasion was imminent. More recently, my clandestine analysis of their alien physiology had revealed underlying biochemical weaknesses that we could exploit — if necessary. Obviously, I couldn't tell Hartmann that. But I could offer him some personal confidences about my scientific background, and make his story look good. Not only would that reveal nothing concerning my current work, it also had the advantage of being absolutely true. I could speak about it at length with complete sincerity.

Ìt's amazing for me to think that a decade ago I'd been on the verge of dropping out from my undergraduate degree,' I began. Ìf you'd asked my parents ten years before that, they'd hardly have believed I'd be a biology freshman at NYU in the first place. Mom encouraged me at school, but my dad didn't care. I guess if it hadn't been for her...'

Ànd that chemistry set you mentioned?'

`That was a Christmas present when I was ten. My mom said later that she was given it by some Scottish doctor, who'd bought two of them for his own son by mistake. So you could say that was the start of it. A lucky break.'

Hartmann nodded, and kept making notes.

`But I'd never have thought of going to university if I hadn't met an English girl.

McShane was a sophomore, studying chemistry. Though she called it "the Science of Loud Bangs". There was certainly chemistry between us. She persuaded me to sign up for biology. And then she damn near broke my heart by going back to England after the first semester. Without a word, without leaving a number. I thought I'd die.'

`First love?' Hartmann asked.

Òh, yeah,' I agreed. 'I think she gave me a confidence in myself. And when she went, that got knocked right out of me. I'd been good. Damn, I'd been the *best in* my year. But after McShane left, I stopped attending lectures, I flunked assignments...'

`What turned it around?'

Ànother guy from England. Met him at racquetball, when I was bumming around missing lectures. Hector something, can't remember his surname. We called him Hex. He was a nurse at NYU Medical Center. He joked that Americans treated England like one big town, and assumed all English people knew each other like neighbours. I joked that he did the worst John Lennon impression I'd ever heard.'

This was where I could happily have stopped, and avoided the temptation to revisit that old pain. But the human interest angle was drawing Hartmann in, and I knew I couldn't stop.

`We were in Times Square, me and Hex, eating tuna melts and chocolate-chip sundaes at Howard Johnson's. I wanted to *see* his reaction to the streetwalkers, maybe catch a flick. Though I'd told him I wanted to point out where the Camel Man used to blow cigarette smoke, like I once showed McShane. Anyway, I thought he was joking when he said he knew her. Except it turned out that he did.

Or had.'

`Go on.'

`She'd returned to England because she'd had only three months to live. He didn't know where she'd gone, how to find her. But I knew from what he told me that NYU was researching a cure. It was years away, and if people like me didn't carry on then there might never be a cure.'

Hartmann smiled. 'And now your research is going to benefit the New York Port Authority, Dr Bergson?' I smiled back politely, but added nothing. 'You insist that you can't comment on these stories from my UN sources?'

`He certainly can't, Mr Hartmann.'

We both turned to the doorway. A short man stood there, wearing a crumpled suit and the most extraordinary knitted vest. He was pointing at the wall clock with his furled umbrella. 'My appointment with you started ten minutes ago. I'm sure that Dr Bergson won't mind. Besides, I have so much to tell you about my exhibit of eighteenth-century tartans at the Met...'

I seized this opportunity, struggled out of the engulfing chair, and practically fled the room. The strange newcomer doffed his straw hat at me as I left. Whoever he was, his arrival could not have been more timely.

When I reached my car outside the Daily *News* building, General Tannenbaum passed me the first of several messages. The Kellenian negotiations were failing, and we could be at war within weeks. 'Here we go,' I told our driver, as we pulled away into traffic. I shuffled through my other paperwork, and reflected on the readiness of my security team. We were as prepared as we could be for the forthcoming Kellenian assault. We had, I knew, anticipated everything.

Times Square, New York, Christmas Eve 2,305

McShane and Hex skated at the Rockefeller Center, circling carefully beneath the gaze of the golden statue of Prometheus. The Doctor also

watched them, from a seat beneath the Christmas tree — an indulgent uncle, his eyes twinkling brighter than the lights that covered the huge Norway spruce.

They'd wanted to walk, but the first snow started to fall as they passed the gaunt grey spires of St Patrick's Cathedral, so they caught a cab.

They only got annoyed when they reached Times Square. The Doctor looked innocently across the table in Roxy's Deli. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I'd forgotten that Howard Johnson's closed earlier this year. But this is nice, isn't it?'

Ìt was when you mentioned HoJo's that we both realised what's been going on, Doctor.' Hex scowled back at him. Ìf you knew that the Kellenians were going to attack Earth at Christmas, 1975, why didn't we just stop them? Instead of all this messing around going back to visit Henry Bergson?'

The Doctor blinked at Hex as though he'd only just noticed him. 'We can't be present everywhere at once.'

'We gave a pretty good impression,' grumbled McShane.

`No, no, no,' insisted the Doctor. 'Earth people have to learn to do things for themselves eventually. It's like teaching someone angling rather than buying them a fish supper. Think of it as extending our presence beyond the immediate present.'

McShane slapped a newspaper on the table, and their coffee cups jolted in their saucers. The headline read 'FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD'.

`You based that entire plan on an interview you read in the New York Daily *News?*

Check that date — an article from thirty years ago. No, don't shush me! It's a tabloid, Doctor! How can you tell that was the true outcome? How did you know it wasn't just a story?'

`Well, it is now,' smiled the Doctor. But he frowned when McShane folded over the newspaper so that the headline now read: 'DROP DEAD'. 'Well, look around you.' He gestured through the window at the Times Square bustle beneath the Christmas illuminations. 'Would you have thought this city could transform the dismal squalor you saw

here thirty years ago into this? Look what humans can do for themselves if only they have the chance. If only the Kellenians had let them.

And you gave them that opportunity! You gave the whole planet the same chance.'

`So, you're telling us this is our present to New York?' said Hex. 'That's why you brought us to this time and this place?'

`Yes,' said the Doctor, eagerly.

`What next? Perhaps we can go back to the Stone Age and give them the gift of fire.'

`Don't give him ideas,' muttered McShane.

Òh, come on, cheer up, you two!' snapped the Doctor. 'Here, open your Christmas presents.'

They tore off the wrapping paper. McShane held up a long lace evening dress.

Hex stared dubiously at what looked like a monk's sackcloth habit. They both turned to look at the Doctor.

He scraped back his chair, stood up, and smiled at them encouragingly. 'I imagine they'll prove useful when we arrive in nineteenth-century Russia,' he said, and beckoned them towards the door. 'I believe there are others who would appreciate our presence.'

Danse Macabre

Joff Brown

An Aduentu re of *the Third Doctor*

Ìt's always been a maxim of mine,' said the Doctor, 'that if an unknown power source is blinking ominously, one should never arbitrarily trigger it. The most awkward explosions often result!'

He looked around the mess of circuitry that made up his years of work on the unresponsive TARDIS console, and ran a hand through his grey curls. He had forgotten he was alone. 'On the other hand,' he said more quietly, 'since there's nobody here to see me if I fail, I may as

well prove myself wrong.'

If any assistant had been in the ship to see him, they'd have noticed an unusual gleam of excitement on that weathered, beak-nosed face. Impetuously, he picked up his purple cloak and flung it over his velvet jacket, then straightened the frills of his shirt. He'd been stuck on this wretched planet for months now, at the beck and call of a military martinet, and his wonderful time ship had been given the cosmic equivalent of a wheel clamp by arrogant higher-ups. But now he had a chance to escape.

He thumbed the smooth, slightly warm artefact in his hand. A semi-legal, disposable one-shot power hit, 'borrowed' from a twenty-eighth-century arms sale. A kind of nitrous boost for the cold fuel cells of the TARDIS, which might just do what all his subtle powers of code breaking could not. He'd forgotten all about it until he'd found it down the back of a sofa in the TARDIS's tiki room.

One burst of power to break his chains. But if, like the djinn who offered you one wish, you used it to get *more* wishes... to find other, greater sources of power...

Why not?

Setting the targeting systems of the TARDIS to any nearby massive power source in time or space, the Doctor attached the device to the control hub. He pulled a lever and listened with satisfaction to the huge hum and roar of the time turbines.

And blacked out almost immediately.

When the Doctor came to, he was clasped to the accommodating bosom of someone who appeared to be Minerva, Greek goddess of wisdom.

Ì' m most terribly sorry, my, ah, dear...' he said, struggling to extricate himself.

Èmma,' she finished for him. 'Had a bit too much of the King's vino, have we?

He's a daft beggar, but he keeps a good cellar.' She was a clear-eyed, red-cheeked young woman in a flowing gown, a ruby necklace and a golden helm that, on closer inspection, appeared to be made of papier mache. The TARDIS loomed in the shadows of the ornate room, its door slightly open. He must have fallen out at his destination, he

realised, disorientated by the unexpected temporal acceleration.

The Doctor got to his feet as Emma looked him over. 'Trousers instead of breeches... no neckerchief .. Though I like that purple cape...' She cocked her 67

head on one side. 'I don't rightly know what your costume for the ball is, pet, but at least you've made an effort.'

The Doctor did his best to regain his poise as he nonchalantly reached into the darkness and pulled the TARDIS door closed. 'Why, thank you. I'm the Doctor. I do hope I'm not late.'

`You'd best put your mask on, Doctor,' she said, wriggling her dress straight.

`We've already been at it for hours.'

The Doctor held out his arm. 'Then please allow me to escort you in...'

They came from the cold. Driven by the *knowledge* that their long-awaited prize lay inside.

Silently they *scaled* the columns and *domes* of the palazzo, *unseen* by the royal *guards.* They paused in the moonlight and sniffed the air. So near, *so very* near...

The festivities were indeed already in full swing as they entered the immense hall.

The orchestra was in the middle of an elegant waltz and hundreds of gleaming figures were spinning and weaving in the light of six titanic, coruscating chandeliers. Harlequins danced with horned rams; long-nosed Scaramouches in gaudy robes conversed with women with the faces of cats. Laughter could be heard everywhere, but never seen; the masks over every face saw to that.

`This must be... Italy, then. Late eighteenth century, give or take a decade?'

`You're far more gone than I thought! Yes, it's Naples, pet. This is Eel Festy-Vall Dee Natalie — or the Christmas knees-up, as you might say. A masked ball. It did say so on the invite.'

But there were whispers, everywhere. A tension in the air. The Doctor heard the word 'invasion' whispered a score of times before he crossed

the ballroom floor.

And the eyes of the courtiers, bureaucrats and nobles beneath the masks seemed anxious, darting from guest to guest.

`These people are in danger.' It wasn't a question.

She nodded solemnly. 'Napoleon's great armies are on their way. And they say there are those in the court who'd open the front door to them too.'

Èmma, is there a source of great power here? Some unexplained energy that has been changing your world?'

Emma blushed. 'You're so direct!' she said. 'Not like the rest of them, gossiping in corners.'

Ì' m afraid I don't understand.'

She twinkled. 'Let's go and meet him, shall we?'

Insinuating *themselves* through an open *window,* they crept with unearthly *silence* through the shadowed corridors. Towards the light. Towards the prize.

The Doctor and his companion stepped up on to one of the raised platforms that surrounded the dance floor, to meet a small, slight, blond-haired man. He was surrounded by what looked to be a gang ofwide-necked sailors, grudgingly attired in an approximation of party finery.

A lot of collar-pulling and sotto *voce* swearing was going on. In the background 68

stood a soberly attired, grey-haired old gentleman, trying to pretend he couldn't hear a word of it.

`Who's this fellow, Emma?' the small blond man asked sourly, stepping up to Emma. His eyes never moved from her as she took his hand. His only hand, the Doctor noticed. His right sleeve was pinned into his chest pocket. While his scarlet jacket and cape were grand enough for any gathering, and though he sported an absurd headdress covered in flashing brilliants, he wasn't wearing a mask.

Èh up, Horatio,' sighed Emma. 'Don't take on so. This is the Doctor, and he's kindly escorted me back to your presence. He doesn't even

know what year it is!'

Ì' m a humble traveller,' explained the Doctor smoothly.

`They won't bring me my small beer, Emma,' the man complained. 'They know I don't have the stomach for this wine, and yet they mock me by bringing me glass after glass. If I should faint, kindly bear me to my quarters!'

It took a lot of petting and flattery to get the man back to his seat. When he was finally settled, he began fanning himself and calling for ice. 'They don't appreciate me, Emma dear,' he moaned. 'And me with just the one arm! After all I've done for them!'

Ì appreciate you, Horatio,' Emma said, staring into his eyes. 'And they made you baron, didn't they, love?'

`Huh,' sniffed the man. 'Baron. What's that mean back home? That's not even a viscount. I don't know why I bother, I really don't. I declare I'm the most unhappy man in existence!'

The Doctor intervened brusquely. 'I'm looking for some kind of power source.

Has there been a strange light in the sky, or any unusual tectonic activity? It's very important.'

For the first time, the man's eyes met the Doctor's, and narrowed. 'What kind of way is that to talk to your superiors, sir?'

Ì wasn't aware I was in the presence of any,' replied the Doctor coolly.

A long, shocked silence followed. Emma was the first to recover. 'Oh, sir! This is Lord Nelson, the hero of the Nile!'

`Baron,' humphed the great man.

Ì'd have you called Duke Nelson Marquis Nile Earl Alexander Viscount Pyramid Baron Crocodile and Prince Victory, if I had my way,' pouted Emma. Nelson looked a little mollified.

The Doctor was determined not to be impressed. Àh. You're... shorter than I thought you'd be.'

The blond-haired man bristled. 'And a cripple! Yes, a cripple! You may as well say it. Looks can be deceiving, sir! Never place any value on them!'

`Believe me, I never do,' the Doctor answered. 'But this time, I think it's you who've underestimated who you're talking to. I am a truly great traveller, you see.

And I must find what I'm looking for.'

Nelson pshawed. 'Don't talk to me of travel. I've sailed from the Indus to the Arctic.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Oh, I think I can safely say that my vessel has travelled further and faster than any of your ships.'

`My Vanguard is the pride of the fleet! There has never been a ship like her! I dismasted the Tonnant and the Guerrier at Aboukir Bay, not these six months hence!'

Ì've saved thousands of lives,' snapped the Doctor. 'Rescued countless innocents. I hardly think you can compare.'

'I am the greatest hero my country has ever produced!' countered Nelson.

`Whole peoples owe me their freedom!'

The Doctor was incensed. 'I've... I've walked on the surface of your moon! I'm well known on Venus! And I've met better men than you, sir — Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar!'

A pause, and then the entire company erupted in laughter. Nelson smiled with the assurance of a man who has had victory handed to him on warm plate. 'My forgiveness, Doctor, I thought you were, at the very least, a man of learning. I had no idea you were a crackpot.' Nelson bowed sarcastically and turned away.

Now they *were* inside, stalking through the *crowd, seen and* unseen. They could *feel* the thrum *of the* prize, so near it sent warm pulses like heartbeats out at each *one* of them. *Desperate* to return...

Odious little man! The Doctor fumed as grotesquely costumed dancers sailed elegantly in his wake. After all, he was a Time Lord, an ancient and absolute master of science!

Let's see his puny little wooden vessel navigate the straits of space—time, eh?

Crackpot, indeed! The Doctor was so busy formulating increasingly theatrical plans to regain his dignity, he almost missed the tall, crimson shape that brushed past him.

Just before the thing vanished into the crowd again, he saw long claws, flexing sinuously. Almost touching the floor. Something wrong. Something *alien.*

And over there, a figure surely too thin for a human. In another direction, goatish legs in the crush of the crowd.

Masks that weren't masks at all.

Behind the scarlet drapes in *the* raised corner of the hall, they *moved closer* to the prize. A few *seconds, and* it would be theirs once *more...*

`Why, it's the man in the moon!' scoffed Nelson. 'Pray don't trouble us, sawbones.'

`This is no time for stupid games! You must leave now!'

`Trouble, eh?' The Doctor thought he could see Nelson's eyes gleam. If he'd expected the foppish baron to quail, he was disappointed. 'The French, is it?'

`Worse.'

`What could be worse than a Frenchman, sir?'

Out from the crowd, one by one, stepped the creatures. While they were in the mass of masked revellers, they were nondescript enough. But as each one emerged, it was clear that these were no men.

Assembled together, the horde of monsters rattled and keened. Those feathers 70

weren't decoration, they were hideous plumage. That harlequin disguise was chameleon skin, changing and pulsing. And those razor-sharp curled horns were real.

No two of them were alike. One stared with iridescent composite eyes, while another raised a long, crooked nose into the air, as if to find a scent. One blood-red figure stooped above the rest, steam seeping from his skull-like rictus. When they were still, every face was mask-like... but a roll of a yellow eye, a casual opening of a tooth-filled jaw, and their animal nature was revealed. Every one of them had long,

thin claws that raked into the marble floor with a horrible skritch.

Leaving marks, the Doctor noticed. Marks in the hard stone.

`Draw, men! To me!' As Nelson barked the order, every one of his crew formed a ring around the small party, swords spiking outwards. All around the great hall, courtiers, nobles and servants were shrinking back to the walls as they realised the horror in their midst.

All the creatures were thin, and moved with unpleasant grace. Slowly, they began advancing. Towards Emma.

Suddenly, the querulous little man was gone. Nelson had flung off his outrageous headdress and was issuing curt orders. 'Look at them! Look *at* them, lads! They look fast, but weak. They'll be fighting with teeth and claws; do not get close enough for them to use them. Sorrell, you take the right flank; Jarvis, the left.'

The Doctor pushed past the rapidly deploying crewmen. 'Nelson! You must get these people out. We have to clear this hall!'

`You! Sawbones! You're mixed up with this, I can smell it. Tie him up!' A couple of burly crewmen ripped off their jackets and secured the Doctor to a sturdy chair.

Ùnhand me! I'm the only one who can help!'

Òn the contrary, Doctor. I have no wish to give these things the run of the place.

My men have fought privateers and matelots on crowded decks — they know how to move in encounters like these. Seal the doors!'

`You're making a massive mistake! You don't know what these creatures are!'

`Do you, Doctor?' Nelson asked as he watched his men circle the foe.

The Doctor paused. 'I don't... but I know they could be far more dangerous than you can imagine!'

Nelson smiled. 'I don't have to imagine danger, Doctor. I know it too well.

Despite what they say about me back home.' He drew his sword, a curved and glorious scimitar studded with jewels. 'Short, and perhaps too delicately wrought,' he said, lost in contemplation. Suddenly, he

glared at the Doctor. 'But for all its finery, it still cuts sharp.'

A hideously bony creature with a face like a bird's skull broke first, suddenly springing towards Emma. Nelson himself parried the attack and forced the thing back. It shrieked and spat in tones that almost made the baron falter, but with one glance at the terrified Emma, the officer was on the offensive again.

Within minutes, the hall was in chaos. Nelson had been right; without an exit or clear path amongst the throng of partygoers, the nimble creatures were at a loss 71

compared to the swordsmen. Foot-long claws swiped the air and snapped swords in half, but the crew of the Vanguard held their own and kept the creatures in the centre of the room. The air rang with the sound of steel on chitin.

The grey-haired gentleman who had been standing with the crew eyed the Doctor apologetically as he struggled to free himself. 'I, ah, don't think we were introduced. Sir William — Lord Hamilton, that is. Emma's husband, don'tcherknow. Sorry about all this whatnot.'

The Doctor continued to struggle. `Pleased to meet you, Sir William. I don't suppose you could untie me, could you?'

`Well, it's a bit irregular, but you seem like a nice enough chap to me.'

It was the Doctor's turn to be surprised. 'Won't you get in trouble with the Hero of the Nile?'

`Please, don't take Lord Nelson's behaviour to heart,' explained Lord Hamilton, loosening the knots. 'Cursed with very delicate sensibilities. Bullied at school!

Wonderful man, really — terrific soldier. Great friend.'

The Doctor rubbed his wrists. let me take you two out of here. I know a safe place.' But Emma Hamilton stood defiantly.

`We're not leaving him. He wields his soldiers like a sword. They'd all die for him, they would.'

Ì' m sure they would. But I don't need to see it.' The Doctor shouldered his way through the frightened mass, leaving the married couple to watch the battle.

From the motley forms of the monsters came more of the unearthly keening, sending some of the hardiest men running from the fray. Suddenly, the men were forced back by a determined onslaught, taking all their power to repel.

Only Nelson saw a hairless, cat-like abomination scramble up the wall-high drapery and spring on to a balcony above their redoubt. But with a shouted order, the officer sent two of the crew climbing after it, scaling the curtain with the sure-handed movements of experienced seamen. Before it could leap down on to Emma, they had cut it from the balcony. It landed at Nelson's feet, and he pinned it to the ground with a boot on what might have been its neck.

`No quarter,' Nelson hissed, raising his sword above his head to deal the fatal blow.

And then all at once, the horrible shrieking stopped, replaced with desperate voices.

Òh, somebody help me, I don't *believe* in any gods but I'm *going* to die, I don't *even* know what *planet* this is...'

`Have at you, you miserable pink-headed freak!'

`You *get* away from her! You won't take *her* away from me! She was my first broodmate! My best!'

In the babble, it was hard to tell which side was speaking for a while.

After the first flurry of voices, a sudden silence descended. The Doctor walked through the stilled combatants, brushing dust off his hands. The creatures 72

quivered, as if to spring into attack. Swords were held at arm's length, ready to strike.

`What... what happened?' Nelson lowered the sword and stared at the velvet-jacketed figure.

`Simple, really. I reconfigured the TARDIS's telepathic translator to decode their language for you — for everyone here.'

Ànd... they can understand us?'

Òh, yes. Loud and *clear,* you disgusting *savage!'* A bird-headed warrior made to jump ahead at Nelson, but the claws of the tall skull-headed

thing prevented her.

Ìt tried to kill Dersa Boota Vamiss!' the bird-headed one cried.

`But it didn't.' The hunched, skull-faced creature turned to look at Nelson. *'Please* don't hurt *her.* If you can *understand speech,* please. *Leave her be.'*

Something ugly passed across Nelson's face. 'I should fillet it here and now! *No* quarter!'

`My lord!' the Doctor called out. 'Wouldn't you like to know who you're killing, first?'

Standing in-between the combatants, the Doctor could hear the whispered voices of the creatures.

Ùgh! They *cover themselves in the* skins of other animals! I hope to God they kill them first.

Don't they *get...* icky?'

Àll *those faces... all the same...* it's just like the old horror stories! Why *do aliens* all look *so alike?'*

Nelson nodded curtly. 'Quickly, then.'

The crimson, skull-faced figure turned to the Doctor. 'You. You're different. *You're a* bicardiac.'

`Makes me sound vaguely alcoholic, but I suppose you're right. I'm the Doctor.'

`The Gallifreyan traveller! Doctor, *answer me this...* why do they keep taking their *faces off?'*

A hundred swords bristled.

`*We've* heard *of* you, Doctor. You do not stand with these animals, then? You're not their ringmaster?'

`These animals are called humans I want to get to the bottom of this mess. Who are you, and what do you want?'

`*We are Freemen of the House* of Kark, of the *sixth* Troupe of the *Caressers* of the Second Sun; I am Griz Ressin Duccar Tayn.'

À pleasure to meet you, I'm sure. How did you come to be here?'

`*We want... that.'*

A single claw extended slowly in the direction of Emma Hamilton. Nelson stepped forward, his face set.

`Hear me, whatever you are. Take one step closer, and I'll kill this one!' He pressed the sword to the cat-traveller's throat.

`Nelson, stop that! You want Emma? Why?'

`She carries the Star of Tarris. *The source of* our power. *The energy* for our pods. Our *way home.'*

Emma's hands fell where her necklace lay.

`The ruby? But it's been in Sir William's family for five generations!'

`There was an accident, and the Star slipped through time and space. We *were* marooned in this galaxy, uncounted light years from our home.'

Nelson's face was set. 'You will have to kill me and all my men before you take what is hers.'

A quiet cough penetrated the tension as Sir William stepped forward. 'In point of fact, I do believe it's mine.'

`Sir William!' Nelson snapped. 'Not now!'

Sir William continued regardless. 'And, Mister, ah, Tayn... I don't mind if you have it. I don't mind at all. I'm sure my great-great-grandfather would understand.'

Nelson made to protest, but Lord Hamilton stopped him with a wave of his hand. 'It, ah, seems to me, old chap, that I can give up that which I hold dear to *me,* with a good will, to whomever I choose.' And he looked hard at Nelson, who bowed his head.

Warily, the officer withdrew the jewelled scimitar and allowed the cat-creature to scurry back to her group. He looked at Emma, who nodded. With infinite gentleness, he removed the necklace. 'Take it,' he said, and threw the ruby into the claws of Griz Ressin Duccar Tayn.

`Thank you. We'll leave now. We... *we're sorry.* You are so... unnatural. It's hard for us to *believe* you think and *love like us. Maybe we... overreacted.'*

Emma breathed a heavy sigh and ran into Nelson's arms. 'It's over, then.'

`Not quite,' corrected the Doctor. 'I think someone else wants a word.'

Armed and armoured guards thudded into the room, followed by an imperious, purple-faced figure in ill-fitting livery.

Àh, his Majesty, Ferdinand, the King of Naples, I presume. I was wondering when you'd show up.'

The king took no notice of the Doctor. 'What are these things, and what are they doing at my party?'

Nelson took one look at the king, and moved slowly towards Griz Ressin Duccar Tayn. Then bowed, low and slow. The traveller took a few seconds to understand, then sinuously returned the gesture.

`These visitors are under the protection of the Crown of the United Kingdom, Your Majesty. And I'm sure you would not want to risk a diplomatic incident, with the French barking at your door?'

It seemed the bald statement of military fact shocked the king more than the presence of the travellers. He trembled and reddened.

`Crown. Some kind of primitive forceld , I think...'

The king blanched. 'I will not have the palace desecrated with this venomous filth! Spies! Traitors! Guards, despatch them!'

`They will not, sir.' Nelson's words stopped the soldiers in their tracks.

`You would defy the Ruler of Naples and the Two Sicilies?' The king's face shone with fury.

'I would and I do.' The king was no match for Nelson's steely glance. 'I think we will not be able to talk face to face in a short while, when you no longer 74

understand my language, but I say this: your men respect me, because I fight with them. You are a coward and an imbecile, and I defy you.'

The king goggled as the Doctor stepped up behind him. 'Time for a

nap, I think ' With a quiet chop to the back of the neck, the king staggered back into the arms of a surprised soldier. 'He'll be fine in an hour or two. Probably just a surfeit of wine, eh?'

Two swords were immediately at the Doctor's throat. There was utter silence as Nelson stared haughtily at the Doctor.

`The king's new physician,' explained Nelson, with the smallest of smiles.

Àuthorised to tend to His Majesty's health. Modern methods. Load of ballyhoo if you ask me, but it's what the king wants.' If anyone else had tried it, it would never have worked. But under the watchful eye of Nelson's crew, the soldiers carried their unconscious king out of the room.

Walking tall, the monsters departed, disappearing into the crowd once more.

Griz Ressin Duccar Tayn turned as he left. 'I'd *get* out, Doctor. Humans *are* dangerous creatures. They can take their faces off: They are not what they appear to *be.'*

It was much later in the night, after the Doctor had been prevailed upon to stay for some more of the king's best vintages. The last of the revellers were departing, but the Hamiltons, Nelson and the Doctor were still deep in conversation.

`The only trouble is, of course, that my gamble didn't work. Translating for so many people has almost worn the TARDIS out again. I've only got enough juice left for one short trip.'

Nelson had Emma on his lap, but was looking distant. 'Ghouls and sprites, I can fathom. But a ship that can make any man understand any tongue? That's the stuff of nursery tales.'

The Doctor smiled and patted his back. 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Emma chortled.

Even Nelson couldn't keep a straight face. 'It's not often one gets to use that phrase so adroitly, eh, you plagiarist?'

`My dear sir, I assure you I was the one who suggested the line to Will Shakespeare. Or at least, I certainly intend to.'

`What did you say?'

`Nothing, my dear fellow, nothing. I think I have to return to where I started.

There are people there who will be expecting me. But when I'm free again — and when you get a break from saving the world too — how's about you come for a pleasure cruise in my vessel?'

Ìt would be an honour, Doctor. And we'll see whether she can really hold a candle to the Vanguard. Which, frankly, I doubt. But I think we too must leave this place soon. Too many masks for an Englishman. Too much vanity.'

As the Doctor turned to make his way to the TARDIS, back to bondage, he couldn't resist taking one more look over the scattered and broken disguises, the empty costumes, the remnants of deception and paranoia and violence. The humanity.

And, like the other visitors that night, he couldn't prevent a shudder.

75

The Church of Saint Sebastian

Robert Smith

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Nyssa ofTraken

Lebanon, 24 December 1199

`We are travellers. It's what we do. It's who we are. We are not content to sit in one place, we go where the wind takes us. We rarely know where we will arrive next or what adventures we'll find there, but we embrace this lifestyle. Can you understand what that must be Like?'

The Doctor looked up sharply, the firelight reflecting in his half-moon spectacles. He was a young man dressed in the Edwardian whites of a cricketer, with dirty-blond hair and a guileless face, but there was a manner to him that spoke of something older and wiser than he appeared. 'I think we may have some inkling,' he said. 'It's Ioanna, isn't it?'

`Yes,' said Ioanna, as though she were imparting some secret. 'But do you travel also? You have no belongings and no horses. Yet I sense in

you the air of those who have seen faraway lands and strange peoples.'

Nyssa smiled at her. She was only a few years older than Ioanna, and unlike her companion she had surrendered to the cool evening by huddling within a long jacket. 'Yes, we travel. And we're always meeting new people. Although we've never met gypsies before. It's very kind of your people to let us share the fire.'

`That remains to be seen,' said a gruff voice behind them. Ioanna looked up to see Braughie, her father's cousin, adding a branch to the fire. He was a bearded, middle-aged man, but had the strength of an ox. 'Be careful, Ioanna, some people are not always what they seem.' He gave the Doctor a disparaging look and moved off as silently as he'd arrived.

Ioanna stuck her tongue out at his back, but waited until he was out of earshot to speak. 'They let you stay, but see how suspicious they are? They say you may be fire-devils, sent here to trick us. Or spies from the village, hoping to keep us away from midnight mass. But you don't look like fire-devils to me and I think the villagers are too set in their ways to spy on us.'

Èxcuse me,' said the Doctor. 'Did you say midnight mass?'

Ìt's an Earth custom,' said Nyssa. 'Every year, humans celebrate Christmas with **a** church service at midnight the night before.' She sniffed. 'I'm surprised you haven't heard of it.'

`Yes, thank you, Nyssa,' he snapped. 'I do know what midnight mass is.' He stared at Ioanna, as though he were peeling away her skin with his eyes, layer by layer. ' What I don't understand is why gypsies who don't share the Christian faith should want to attend a church service.'

`Didn't you know?' said Ioanna. 'It's the midnight of the century. But the villagers won't let us in, so we wait here, until they change their minds. Oh, I hope they will! I've been waiting so long to see Mama.'

`The villagers won't let you see your mother?' asked Nyssa. 'That's appalling.

Doctor, we have to help her.'

`Hmm ,' said the Doctor. 'Are they holding your mother hostage in

some way?'

Ioanna giggled, then caught herself. 'Oh, no. Mama caught the fever, you see. It was my fault, because I caught it first, but I recovered. Poor Mama... But tonight I'll see her again, one final meeting before she moves on. If only I can be in the church at midnight.'

`Moves on?' asked Nyssa. 'Is your mother sick?'

`No, silly. She died two years ago.'

A curious expression flitted across the Doctor's face. He coughed. 'Actually,' he said, 'I think we may be able to give you some assistance.'

'I demand to speak to someone in authority,' said the stranger who called himself a doctor.

The old man hobbled to the village gates. They were well protected from outsiders behind their wooden walls, with guards to stop anyone who might try to force their way through.

Ì am Zick,' he said, eyeing this doctor cautiously. 'I am the eldest in the village.

You may speak to me.'

`Good *evening,'* he replied cheerily. 'Someone rational, at last. I've come to speak on behalf of your visitors. Well, some of them, at any rate. They told me an enlightened people such as yourselves refused them entry. Naturally I didn't believe a word of it, so I thought I'd let you know, so you can share your, ah, gift.

In the spirit of Christmas.' He grinned. 'Goodwill to all, that sort of thing.'

À miracle has been granted unto us, a miracle for the faithful.' Zick pointed at the church looming behind him, just within the village wall. 'This is a holy place, a place of worship. We do not open it to heathens.'

`They don't want to interfere with your ceremony, they just want a chance to meet their ancestors. Besides, your miracle may not even be real. No one alive has seen it, have they?'

Zick knew every eye in the village was watching him. There were

those who thought differently to the elders. This stranger was more cunning then he seemed.

À hundred years ago, my grandfather witnessed *the* miracle with his own eyes.

Twelve centuries ago tonight, our Lord was born and he has bestowed this gift on his chosen people.'

`Have you considered that it might be a trick?' Deftly the stranger reached out and pulled a series of knotted handkerchiefs from Zick's pocket. Villagers gasped in surprise, many making the sign of the cross. Even the guards took a step back.

Ì have seen deceptions such as these before,' said Zick, loudly enough so everyone could hear him. This man was very dangerous. Others would fall for his wiles, open the gates out of Christian duty. And so offer themselves up to the hordes. On no account could he be allowed in through the gates. 'Be gone! We have said all there is to say.'

* * *

78

`Now,' whispered Nyssa, motioning to Ioanna, although the girl was staring rapt at the handkerchief trick. 'Now, while he's got their attention.'

Unnoticed, they scaled the wall at the far corner of the town, and quietly slipped into Saint Sebastian's church.

The Doctor returned to the camp. 'I'm terribly sorry,' he said. 'But they simply won't let you in.'

Braughie was the strongest of the group, so his voice carried more weight than the others. 'Well, that's just fine,' he called out. 'We have tried talking, we have tried asking. And still they refuse us. I say enough is enough. We have been treated like rats for too long. Are we going to sit back and take it? I say it is time for action.

Who will march with me?'

The crowd that cried out in unity was small, but fierce. They grabbed tools and rocks and began to march in the direction of the village. Behind them, the Doctor allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

Inside the church of Saint Sebastian, Nyssa and Ioanna huddled behind a tapestry, talking in whispers.

`When we learned of the miracle of this church,' said Ioanna, 'we simply had to come. It was said that anyone responsible for someone's death was granted one final meeting before the dead moved on. I didn't mean to, but she wouldn't have died if I hadn't caught the fever. Oh, Nyssa, can you know my grief?'

Nyssa took a deep breath. 'The Doctor wanted us to investigate. He thinks this place might contain the consciousness of an alien presence —'

Ì don't know what that is,' said Ioanna.

'A... spirit, a soul,' said Nyssa, 'that crash-landed here centuries ago, buried beneath the church. One that feeds off guilt, or possibly perceived guilt, or the energy of group emotion, which he's hoping to stimulate, in order to galvanise the effect.'

`Tes ...' said Ioanna, mystified by and in awe of the words. But Nyssa was not talking to her any longer, she was working it out for herself.

`The alien's circadian rhythm must have come into synch with the local calendar. It would make sense in a religious-centred level-two society...'

Ioanna's mouth hung open.

`L.' began Nyssa, her voice quivering. 'I lost someone too. But that was some time ago and I'm over it, I really am.'

`But you're curious, aren't you?'

Ì just want to make sure that it doesn't affect my judgment. You understand. It's for the investigation.'

`Yes, Nyssa,' said Ioanna gently. 'I do understand.'

Zick stood firm behind the guards. 'You had ample time to attend service any day of the year. This church does not exist for your benefit, it is a place of penance. Of sacrifice. I will not surrender it to unbelievers.'

The Doctor tried to speak, but Zick drowned him out.

`You see what barbarians these people are? You see how they intend to attack us and take what we have built? Are these your civilised savages, Doctor?'

Behind him, the church bell began to toll.

At the twelfth bell, Nyssa peered out from behind the cloth. The church was half full, with villagers praying or looking heavenward in expectation. Nothing had happened. Perhaps the legends had lied.

No, wait.

A figure had appeared in the centre aisle, translucent and glowing a dull green.

Nyssa gripped the material she was holding. A man ran to the *figure* and threw himself to the ground. Even from this distance, Nyssa could see he was weeping.

So it really was true.

`Mama?'

Nyssa turned to see Ioanna staring at the vestry by the side wall. More ghostly figures were appearing throughout the church, but only one was dressed in gypsy rags. Nyssa grabbed Ioanna to prevent her from running out.

'If we crawl behind those pews, we can make it there unseen.'

They made their way, quietly and carefully, toward the *figure*. Nyssa saw that more of the apparitions were appearing by the second. But there weren't any familiar faces among the crowd of ghosts.

Ioanna looked up at the figure, hugging herself with her long arms. Green light reflected off Nyssa's jacket. And then the woman smiled the most beautiful smile Nyssa had ever seen. It was a smile that spoke of calmness and serenity. Ioanna burst into tears. Nyssa felt suddenly at peace with the world. Perhaps the Doctor's investigation wasn't as important as this.

Perhaps there really could be such a thing as —

'Father?'

There, at *the* church altar, stood a ghostly green figure dressed unlike any other.

The figure looked around, as though searching, green light shining from his beard. Nyssa couldn't help herself. She had to go to him. She leapt up from behind the pews and ran out into the crowd.

`Heathens! There are heathens in the church!'

Zick turned at the cry. Inside the church the villagers had captured a strange woman and a gypsy girl. So that was this stranger's strategy. Another trick! He talked the words of a civilised man, but he was a scoundrel who would cheat his way into anything.

`Release them,' growled Braughie. 'Or you'll have a fight on your hands you never bargained for.'

Zick turned to the gypsy, the fury in his eyes ready to smite. Before *he* could speak, one of the guards struck Braughie with his poleaxe. The man went down.

The crowd surged and suddenly the guards were in full retreat, the gates wide open. Zick hobbled back as the gypsies raced forward. Guards struck out wildly, but the mob was inside the town.

And the Doctor. The Doctor was peering into the church as though studying 8o

some book. Nodding to himself, as though he'd planned this all along. Zick raised himself up to his full height and marched over to the demon Doctor.

`You,' he rumbled. 'You have lied, cheated and tricked your way past me. You have brought a mob of blasphemers into our holiest of places and you... Are you listening to me?'

The Doctor looked up at Zick briefly, hardly even seeing him before his gaze snapped back to the church.

Zick was a rational man, who maintained his position by logic and force of argument. He studied the Bible daily, and agonised about keeping to the true path through his life. But this stranger had tested him to the limit. Zick was an old man now, but still a force to be reckoned with. He reached for the Doctor and shoved him as hard as he could. The blow sent the Doctor reeling forward, crashing into the ground.

Zick stood over the Doctor, who was sprawled on his back. The Doctor looked up at him, but there was no fear in his eyes, no surprise. He

just sighed, as though about to remonstrate with a wayward child. But the superior look didn't last.

He looked around and realised he'd fallen within the church itself.

Nyssa struggled with her captor, but the villager was too strong. She craned her head to try to see her father, but couldn't find him among the other ghostly figures. More ghosts were appearing every second. The gypsies had found their way into the church and their dead were jostling with those of the villagers.

Somewhere, someone screamed. Nyssa's eyes opened wide when she saw what had appeared in the church. The figure was green and opaque, but it had the blank-faced look of an android. Beside her, a man materialised, his face twisted and disfigured, one eye hanging from its socket. In the vestry, she saw a many-tentacled thing, with more mouths than she could count.

Nyssa realised the church was filling with all manner of aliens and humans and hideous creatures. And every last one of them was calling the Doctor's name Zick stared in horror. His church had been violated. The desecration! What were those things?

`Spawn of the devil,' yelled Braughie beside him, catching the attention of most of those fighting around him. 'Evil! This place is evil.'

Zick grabbed his arm, suddenly realising who their common enemy was. 'The Doctor. Those things are calling for the Doctor.'

`Burn it,' Braughie said, suddenly calm. 'Fetch oil and burn it to the ground.

Burn everything.'

Somebody ran to obey. Zick screamed.

Ioanna stared in horror. Her captor suddenly let go of her and fled. Beside her, Nyssa's captor had fainted.

`Run, Ioanna,' said Nyssa urgently. 'Run.'

But Ioanna didn't do as she was bidden. These devil creatures, she thought, they were calling the Doctor's name The Doctor, who appeared from nowhere, with **Si**

skin so pale and no belongings. The Doctor, who used her to sneak his companion inside. This strange girl who spoke in mystic incantations.

Inside this very place, where the spawn of Satan had been summoned.

`The strangers,' she yelled. 'They did this. They brought these abominations to us. They're fire-devils. We have to stop them. Stop them, now.'

The air was full of smoke. Nyssa struggled for breath, her eyes streaming and head dizzy. By the door, the Doctor stood immobile, surrounded by flames. Villagers and gypsies were tying a rope into a noose. Everywhere, there were monsters. She looked to the altar. There, beside something nine-foot tall and plant-like, stood her father. This was her only chance to see him again, her only chance to tell him how sorry she was, to tell him she loved him more than anyone else in the universe.

She looked at the Doctor, standing stock-still, his body frozen in shock. She looked back at her father.

Ioanna pointed at the fire-devil. 'There, there's the demon.'

The mob of villagers and gypsies slowly advanced on the demon, carefully avoiding the apparitions. All around them, the creatures called his name, called him to account for their deaths.

Suddenly, a figure rushed in and grabbed the Doctor, wrestling him away from his reverie. 'Come on, Doctor,' begged Nyssa, practically dragging him across the floor. 'We have to get back to the TARDIS. We have to go now.'

Ioanna screamed amid the flames. 'Get them! Get them both.' But the strangers had disappeared.

Nyssa sighed. The Doctor stood in the console room, almost as unmoving as he had in the church. He hadn't said a word since dematerialising.

`Nothing,' she said. 'I've checked the databanks and there's no record of any further effects after we left. The entire village is missing from thirteenth-century records. I think we can safely conclude that the alien's effects on history are negligible.'

The Doctor continued to stare at the floor.

`Look, Doctor,' she began, 'I understand what that must have been like for you.

I lost my mother, my father, my entire world, everyone I'd ever known. But people die. I realise that now. All those monsters we saw were evil and the innocents who died did so for the greater good.' She took his hand. 'If, in the course of some fight for a noble cause, it happened to me, I wouldn't blame you. I want you to know that.'

The Doctor looked up, meeting her eyes for the first time. 'And what was my great and noble cause? Simply to understand the nature of that church and the consciousness buried beneath it. But we know what curiosity cost the cat.'

`Cost? What do you mean?'

His face was ashen. 'I know that sometimes innocents die for a greater cause.

And the monsters bring it upon themselves. But that alien intelligence didn't just feed off the deaths you had been responsible for. It also had the power to give you visions of those whose deaths you will be responsible for. In the future.'

Nyssa let his hand go. Ìf you saw my face there, I don't want to know.'

`No,' said the Doctor, smiling a sad smile. 'I didn't see your face. But I did see ghostly shapes I knew. Faces I recognised, the future response to my actions. The manifestations, the fighting, the fire. It was all my fault.'

`What was? Who did you see?'

`The villagers and the gypsies. Condemned to death for my sins.' His voice was almost a whisper. 'Not just some of them,' he said. 'All of them.'

The Prodigal Sun

Matthew Griffiths

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor,

with Leela

Once the clan had unpacked and gone to sleep, Cunovellasus stole away up the hillside to the fort. Calagundus watched him, following the light from his torch as it dwindled into the distance. He was still too excited to rest, his thoughts full of tomorrow's festivities, but his mother was already fast asleep. Calagundus pulled on an extra animal skin and, careful not to disturb the cattle, he set out after the druid.

Despite the season, the sky was a bright, deep blue. As he made his way up the hill, Calagundus looked at the jagged branches that criss-crossed above the path, hard **and bare in the cold night, and beyond them, the solid silhouette of the fort.**

It seemed so huge, even from down here. Big enough for ten clans. Calagundus stopped and shivered. He realised he had lost sight of Cunovellasus's torch.

He started to think of the stories his mother had told him about the Romans.

Had the druid fallen into a trap? But the invaders had left long ago, he thought. He had heard *other* stories about the fort, though — about how the Romans had brought their gods with them to build it, about how the soldiers who had fallen in battle were still there, and defended the fort beyond their own deaths. He imagined the shadowy legions, snuffing out Cunovellasus's light, dragging him inside to meet their gods...

He thought he heard something behind him and looked round. He could make **out the clan's** fire at the bottom of the hill and, in the distance, the lights of Luguvallum. Then, for a second, he thought he saw movement on the hillside.

Was that a shadow, coming up the path towards him? He turned and scurried the **rest of the way up the hill. He had to find Cunovellasus.**

Someone stepped across the path in front of him and Calagundus cried out.

`Hush, child!' It was Cunovellasus, his voice deep and reassuring. Light from **his torch flickered around them. 'What are you doing here?'**

Ì couldn't sleep,' said Calagundus between breaths.

The druid chuckled. 'The night before the festivities, I'm surprised you're the **only boy still awake!' He patted Calagundus's shoulder. 'Come with me.'**

Calagundus hesitated at the ditch that surrounded the fort. 'There's no one here,' the druid assured him. They scrambled across the ditch, then through the gateway into the fort. Calagundus stopped by each simple, boxy building, looking **from one to the next, thinking he could make out dark figures flitting about between them in the torch's light. 'There's no need to worry,' said Cunovellasus.**

`The Romans left many years ago.'

They **emerged into an open space, in front of a larger building, where Cunovellasus had lit a small fire. He ushered Calagundus towards it, but the boy held** back. He pointed at the building.

`What is it?' he asked.

`The legionaries' temple,' said the druid. Calagundus looked up. The temple's roof was supported on heavy columns of stone, as broad and tall as trees, but the roof tilted down towards the near side, where part of the wall had collapsed.

Cunovellasus held the torch nearer so they could see.

There was a carving on one of the triangular tiles on this end of the roof.

Calagundus made out a round, laughing face with stars either side of it and an eight-spoked wheel above.

Òne of the gods they took from us,' the druid said. 'The one we must honour tomorrow, so the sun will return.' He paused, and gestured at the fallen stones.

`The invaders' offerings were not enough to save this temple from the storms.'

Then Cunovellasus crossed to the fire and laid his torch upon it.

Calagundus joined him. 'Were you too excited to sleep as well?' he asked the druid. Cunovellasus scratched his beard, and pointed to the

sky. One star shone very brightly indeed.

`You see that?' Calagundus peered upwards. 'That is not a winter star. The last few days, I have been looking for the signs that will tell us when spring returns.

This star has grown larger and closer in the east each night. Like us, it seems to be travelling to this place.' He caught Calagundus's eye. 'Perhaps spring will be sooner than we expect.'

Calagundus stared at him. Tut that's impossible!'

Ì wanted to be sure of it,' Cunovellasus said. 'So I came here to get a clearer —'

Suddenly, there was a sound coming from inside the temple, an eerie cry or a bellow as though one of the cattle were trapped in there.

Ìt's an ambush,' cried Calagundus, 'a Roman trap!'

The sound stopped. For a moment, it was silent. Then there was another noise, like stones cracking, and a shout came from inside the temple. Two people hurried from the building as the roof gave way entirely and toppled inside. Calagundus covered his eyes to keep the dust out. When he looked again, one of the newcomers was flapping a hand to clear the air.

`That was not a good idea, Doctor,' said the stranger — a girl, Calagundus saw as the dust settled. She was wearing the skins of some strange creature that left her arms and legs uncovered.

`How was I to know it had been built into the main support?' the other one snapped. He was taller, and dressed in even stranger clothes: a grey-brown robe, with a long belt of wool in many colours draped around his neck. He had a sharp nose and dark, curly hair that was flecked with grey dust. There was something in his pronounced features, his regal bearing, that reminded Calagundus of his mother's stories.

`Romans!' breathed Cunovellasus.

Ì beg your pardon?' The man frowned at him.

`You were right, Calagundus. They set a trap!'

`Then you know you are in danger!' the girl said.

`Where are your legionaries?' Cunovellasus turned to Calagundus. 'Quickly, boy — run back to the clan and tell them —'

`There are more of you ?' the man interrupted. His voice sounded concerned, not angry. 'This is worse than I thought, Leela.'

The girl looked at Cunovellasus. 'Where is the rest of your clan?'

The druid was silent. Calagundus hesitated. 'My mother...' he began, but Cunovellasus put a hand on his shoulder.

`Shhh, son. They want to know how strong we are, how much resistance we can put up.'

`Your mother? Where is she?' The stranger looked straight at Calagundus. His voice was deep, but gentle and friendly. 'It's all right. You can trust me. I'm the Doctor.'

`She's Calagundus faltered. He looked out of the old fort, down *the* hillside.

`They're down there.'

`Thank you,' said the stranger — the Doctor. He turned to the girl. `Leela, I want you to go down there and fetch the rest of the clan, bring them up to the fort. We'll all be safer here.'

`Safe from what?' Cunovellasus snapped. 'Your own...'

Then the sun rose.

Calagundus blinked. It came suddenly out of the east, climbing more swiftly than he had ever seen it. And it was so warm. How could the sun have come back so quickly, before they'd even had their celebrations? Had winter been wasted in the blink of an eye?

`They're *here!'* the Doctor cried. He raced back over to the temple, and started to clamber up the heap of fallen stones, the long woollen strap flapping out behind him. He climbed as high as he could, then scowled. `Gah. There's no way in!'

Cunovellasus pointed, his own shadow almost touching the stranger. 'This was a temple to the sun god — and you destroyed it. The god must be coming to avenge himself!'

`You do not make any sense,' said the girl, Leela. 'Why would we destroy our own temple?' She sounded like she was telling the druid off.

`Look!' The Doctor nodded back down the hillside. Calagundus squinted. About a mile away, a row of shadowy figures was moving towards them. They were like dark ghosts shimmering across the pale landscape. As they reached a clump of leafless trees, the figures blurred around the edges. There was a flicker of flame and smoke, and the trees were gone.

The shadow-men continued to cross the ground steadily, not stopping or swerving, and as Calagundus looked around, he could see they were approaching from all directions. It would not be long before they reached the hill — and before that, they would reach the clan. The Doctor scrambled back down from the temple.

Ìt's the dead legion,' said Calagundus

`They're not Romans,' the Doctor replied. 'Though they've been shadowing them. They're after something the legionaries left in that temple.'

Ànd they've bought the sun with them?' Calagundus asked.

`Well, not quite.' The Doctor took one of the branches from the fire. 'But if you were looking for something in the dark, you'd bring a torch, wouldn't you?'

'So... what are they looking for?' asked Cunovellasus.

À relic that the Roman soldiers brought with them. Only it's not a real relic. It's a homing device.' He beamed at Calagundus. 'But I found it before them.'

Ànd lost it,' Leela reminded him.

The Doctor was immediately serious again. 'Yes. We have to get it back before they destroy us all.'

`The clan...' whispered Calagundus. The Doctor patted him on the shoulder.

`That's why we've got to find a way in again, while we've still got

time.' He strode back to the building and began shifting rubble. 'Well, don't just stand there, you lot. Give me a hand!'

Calagundus and the others joined him, and he began passing them stones.

Cunovellasus still seemed dazed, and stared down the hillside at the silent, approaching shadows. 'These people are not gods?'

`That's right,' said the Doctor.

`Yet they bring their own sun. They are as good as gods!'

`Do not be frightened,' said Leela. She brushed a lock of auburn hair back over her ear. 'You cannot stop a god. But we will stop them!'

The Doctor was staring intently at the space he had cleared. 'How old are you, Calagundus?'

Èleven.'

`Good,' the Doctor nodded. 'You know, Romans laid the foundations of Western architecture. Underfloor heating, drainage...' He reached down into the space below him and felt around. Àh-hahr

`What is it, Doctor?'

Èleven years old. Just about big enough to fit in there!'

Calagundus looked at the gap the Doctor had cleared. The small, coloured stones beneath it were cracked, and there was a hole below them, sharp with shadow in the brightness.

`You cannot let him, Doctor! I shall go,' said Leela.

The Doctor looked her up and down, as if he had never really seen her before.

`You're a grown woman, Leela!' He smiled at Calagundus. 'Our young friend here will be much more agile.'

`Calagundus cannot go in there,' Cunovellasus spluttered. 'He's —'

`What?' said the Doctor. He looked at Calagundus. 'You were brave enough to come up here in the dark, weren't you? You're a brave chap, aren't you?'

Calagundus had never been called a chap before. He looked away, back down the hillside. The shadow-men were much nearer now. He tried not to imagine what one of them would look like close up. He turned back to the Doctor, who smiled at him again.

`What should I do?' asked Calagundus.

`Lift your arms!'

Calagundus did so, letting his extra animal skin fall to the ground. The Doctor took the woollen strap from around his neck and tied it round Calagundus's waist.

Ìf you crawl through here, you'll come up inside the temple. Then you grab the device.'

`The...?'

`The homing device. It's a golden disk, with a metal strap around the back. It should have a carving on it —'

Ìt will look like this!' Leela smiled. She knelt and picked up one of the tiles from the rubble, the one Cunovellasus had shown him with the round face of the sun god.

`Very good!' the Doctor said. 'And when you've done that, find the blue — the blue shrine inside the temple, and throw the disk inside.'

A golden disk, a blue shrine... Calagundus closed his eyes. He could feel the light seeping through, the shadows dancing around the edge of his eyelids. He could see a ring of fire closing in on the hill, the clan — but now he knew what to do. He opened his eyes and scrambled into the hole.

`Good luck!' the Doctor called.

Calagundus squatted down protectively and looked around. He was in an open space, about half his height, supported on piles of stones. Ahead of him, more of the larger blocks had fallen through the floor above, and dust twinkled up into the air. He pictured the main part of the temple over the hole, and, trailing the woollen strap out behind him, he crawled towards it, careful not to knock against any of the heaps of stones on his way. He shuffled underneath the hole and peered upwards.

To his left, the wall was still supported by tall, round columns of stone. But the roof sloped down to the right into the remains of the opposite wall, where a column had fallen across the centre of the building. The column was lodged against a blue, wooden box. That must be the Doctor's shrine, Calagundus thought. The door was open.

Calagundus hauled himself through the hole, sending dust spinning into the air as he got to his feet. He took a couple of cautious steps inside and looked around.

The dust had been scuffed away in his footprints, and he made out the small coloured tiles that had been used to decorate the floor. Light shone through gaps in the stone.

He wiped sweat from his forehead. Could it really be day outside, on a black, midwinter night? He shivered, suddenly confused. He could smell burning, as though the dust was hot. He imagined the flames, racing all the way up the hill to the fort.

Calagundus blinked. The light picked out a round, golden disk. He stumbled over to it, grabbed the disk and tossed it through the open door of the Doctor's shrine. Then he turned and ran back towards the hole. But as he approached, he skidded in the dust, losing his balance and falling against the tiles. The floor gave way beneath him. He tried to call out, but the breath was knocked from him. He rubbed the dust from his eyes as the stones began to fall.

The wool tightened and tugged at his stomach. He felt the ground shift beneath him, just as the floor fell in. The ground grazed his knees and elbows as he was dragged across it. He felt a large pair of hands reach down and pull him free of the 89

rubble. He could see the Doctor smiling down at him, teeth bright against his silhouette. But the air around him was dimmer.

The Doctor hoisted Calagundus on to his shoulder. 'Look!'

High above them, the sun was fading away into the night. Calagundus looked down the hill. Even in the failing light, he could see patches of burnt shrubs, but the fires had stopped and the darkness was still. There were no shadows any more.

`Welcome to the Dark Ages,' said the Doctor, lowering Calagundus to the ground.

`What happened?' asked Cunovellasus.

`The homing device is safe. Hidden from their searchlight.' Cunovellasus looked at him quizzically. 'My shrine is a little bit safer than this temple,' the Doctor explained.

`Where did the shadows go? And their sun?' asked Calagundus.

The Doctor looked up into the night sky, wrapping the woollen strap back around his neck. 'Back into orbit to scan once more.' He looked at Calagundus.

`They wanted to destroy the last trace of their enemies, but now it's vanished from time and space.' He hefted one of the fallen stones. 'At least this way, some of the old civilisation will survive.'

Cunovellasus stepped forward. 'You — saved us.'

The Doctor nodded, then shook his head. 'No, Calagundus saved us.' He threw the block to one side and bent to pick up another, but Leela put a hand on his elbow.

`What are you doing, Doctor?'

The Doctor sighed. 'In case you hadn't noticed, my girl, all of this masonry is between us and the TARDIS.'

Ìn case you did not notice, there is a clan at the bottom of this hill.' She looked to Calagundus and Cunovellasus. 'Will your people help us?'

Calagundus and the druid exchanged a glance.

`The solstice...' Cunovellasus began.

`They can celebrate with us!' said Calagundus. 'Then afterwards we'll help them recover the shrine.' Cunovellasus shrugged, then nodded.

The Doctor stood and gestured at the ruins. He looked as though he was about to say something. Then he grinned. 'You wouldn't have any mead, would you?'

Cunovellasus chuckled, and took four branches from the fire, handing one to each of them. They stood there for a moment in the warm, flickering light, then the Doctor ushered Calagundus in front of them. The young man smiled, and led them back through the fort, down the hillside to his clan.

Be Good For Goodness's Sake

Samantha Baker

An Adventure of the Eighth *Doctor*

`... and it's nearly seven o'clock. We'll check this evening's news headlines at the top of the hour, but first here's Michael Jackson with Man in the Mirror —'

David Gilligan clicked off the radio. The windshield was getting covered again, so he flicked the wipers a couple of times to get rid of the mounting snow. He had to keep the house in his line of sight. Sixteen-forty Cinnamon Drive, a modest two-storey family home in a nice blue-collar neighbourhood. It was hardly Southfork, but he'd get a good haul from it.

He'd been watching the house, on and off, for a few weeks now — just one of the many he'd considered in this area of town. He'd managed to find out who lived there — a young professional couple, two small children — and what their plans for tonight were.

`We're going to my sister's,' he'd overheard the mom telling her neighbour one morning. 'We go every Christmas Eve.' He'd formed his plan around that detail.

Except it was now dark and they hadn't left. Perhaps the snow had put them off.

David flicked the wipers again. They dragged heavily, protesting. The street was empty. Earlier this afternoon, children had been having snowball fights, their galoshes scrunching and squelching as they ran. It wasn't so long ago that David was their age, and would have taken part.

He looked up, squinting through the snow — 1640's porch light had just come on. They were getting ready to leave. Moments later, the front door opened and David saw four figures, all in coats, hats and scarves. They hunched over to avoid getting snow in their faces, battling the short distance to the station wagon parked in the driveway. He watched the car slowly pull out and head south — they were probably headed for the freeway.

This is it. Don't be nervous.

David buttoned his coat, deliberately taking his time, calming himself.

He stepped out of his car. Hell, it was cold. He opened the trunk and took out a shoulder bag. His car looked a bit out of place — though this was not a rich area, most of the other vehicles on the street had probably been paid for by their owners, not jacked from a second-hand dealership out of town.

David double-checked that there was no one around. This type of job was risky, especially in a gossipy neighbourhood, but he had little option. He'd done five or six of them over the last few months — they paid the rent, saw him through for a while. He was actually getting good at them. A bit of planning always paid off.

He walked up the driveway and cut straight past the house, down a side alleyway and into the small back yard. He looked round and checked that the snow was filling in his footprints. It wasn't falling heavily, but constantly enough to disguise them.

Using a short crowbar, he popped open a window. The wood frame was old and 91

gave way easily. David took off his shoes. They were wet and he couldn't afford to leave prints inside, so, after banging them against the wall to shake off the snow, he put them in his bag. He wasn't wearing any socks and even though he only stood there in the yard for a second or two his feet began to freeze and numb. He carefully climbed through the window into a dimly lit dining room.

Taking a flashlight from his bag, David scanned the surroundings. He could see through to the front room — a TV, VCR and stereo all visible. Could he perhaps pull his car into the driveway and load up? No, he'd come for small things — a quick inand-out. Only take what you can carry. David moved from room to room — the living room, the kitchen, up the stairs to two bedrooms. His bag filled more quickly than he'd anticipated. He grabbed jewellery, a couple of credit cards he found on a dresser, some cash, a few trinkets that might be worth something.

In the back bedroom, the parents' by the look of it, he found a photograph album lying open. The smiling faces caught his eye. He sat on the bed for a moment, flicking through the pages. They began with wedding photos, then baby pictures, then birthdays and holidays. In every single one, the family was smiling.

There was something intimate about being in someone else's house, of going through their things. It was as if he were sharing in their lives.

David didn't know if this excited or saddened him.

His bag was full now. It would be a few days before he could sell it all on — even his contacts took Christmas Day off. But it would mean a good start to the new year. David moved to the front bedroom for a final look around. It was clearly the children's room: two single beds, Chicago Bears posters on the wall, Star Wars dolls lying around the floor.

He clicked his flashlight off; the only illumination now was the glow coming from the streetlamp outside. He could hear the dull sound of traffic — all moving slowly in the harsh weather. It was as he realised that the sound was getting closer that he noticed new lights shining in through the window.

A car had pulled into the driveway.

David dashed to the window and looked down. It was the family. The two kids were already out of the car, throwing snow at each other. The older boy had worked out how to get better range by squishing the snow together. The parents got out too — and they now had a man with them. David bolted from the room, no concession to being sneaky. He'd just started down the stairs, however, when the front door — directly opposite — began to open. He had no choice but to rush back up and duck down behind the landing banister. Perhaps they'd forgotten something, and would only be nipping in.

David could hear their voices as the group came in and if he craned his neck slightly so he could glimpse sight of the hallway. The two children, both boys, quickly took off their coats and threw them on to a rack on the wall. The parents were talking to their new friend as the father, loaded down with shopping sacks, closed the door.

Às I say, it's very kind of you,' said the stranger, English by the sound of it. He was around the same age as the parents — in his thirties or so — and had brown hair that almost reached his shoulders. Some kind of old hippie, probably. His knee-92

length jacket didn't fit that idea though — too austere, too grand. He brushed snow from his shoulder and his hair as he looked around, taking in his surroundings.

`Not at all,' said the mom. 'It's Christmas Eve and you have nowhere to go. What else were we going to do? Scott, take the Doctor through and get him a drink. I'll just call Jean.' David watched as the men left her. The woman took a phone from the hall table and dialled a

number.

After a moment she said, 'Jean? It's Melinda. Sorry, sweetie, we can't come!'

Damn, they were staying. What would David do now?

`No, the police are turning people away,' Melinda was saying. 'The road's totally blocked off... We're snowed in... I'm sorry too... We've got Mom and Dad tomorrow, why don't we try to bring them over the day after? ... Sure that'd be nice... Okay, Jean, love to everyone and merry Christmas.' She hung up the phone and walked out of David's sight into the living room. He could still hear the adults talking if he strained.

`Well, I suppose I better get us something to eat,' said Melinda. 'It'll have to be sandwiches, I'm afraid, Doctor.'

Òh, I love sandwiches!' he said.

`Peter!' shouted Scott, the father. `Ralphie! Stop messing around and sit down.

You'll knock the damn tree over!'

`Kids, eh?' said the Doctor. 'They always love Christmas, don't they? I mean, really love it.'

`So, Doctor,' said Scott. 'What brings you to Illinois?'

Èxcuse me?'

`Your accent. **It's English.**'

`More or less. I'm just visiting. I love America at this time of year.'

Wonderful, thought David, they'd be here all night. He could feel sweat building on his brow and in the small of his back. How would he get out without being seen? Perhaps when they went through to the back room to eat? Had David left the window open after he'd climbed in, or had he slid it back into place? He just couldn't remember.

`... and you were walking around?' he heard Scott say. 'Nowhere to go?'

`Sort of,' replied the Doctor. David could **hear** the grin on his face.

'You see, I'm travelling with a friend of mine. Anyway, Charley's gone to a... disco? Is that the right vernacular for 1987? I'm sorry, **I** can never remember.' It sounded like he found it funny.

`Probably the Future Club,' said Melinda, approaching them. 'That's the only place open tonight in the whole of Sherman, I think.'

`Yes, so I had a few hours to kill and as this is such an interesting place I thought **I'd** have a look around. I was getting a bit cold, I must admit. It was very kind of **you** to offer me your hospitality.'

`You can't go walking up and down the highway on Christmas Eve, Doctor,' said Melinda. 'You should be with your friend.'

`Charley did ask if I wanted to go to this Future Club place,' he said, 'but I could **read** the signs: "I'm only asking to be polite. I'm going on my own." You know **what** teenagers are like. And, anyway, now I've made new friends.'

`Right, boys,' called Melinda. 'We'll be eating in a minute, so upstairs and wash your hands.'

Upstairs? It took David a moment to react. Upstairs, blast it. He dashed into the back bedroom — the parents'. He should be safe here. If the boys were just using the bathroom, he'd be fine. He scanned round, looking for a weapon, anything he could use. Nothing.

David stood just inside the room, in the shadows behind the door. He heard the two kids run up the stairs and across the landing. He then heard water flowing into a sink.

Slowly, gently, David took his shoes out from inside his bag and slipped them on his feet. If he had to make a run for it, he'd need them.

The children were playing. David could hear them laughing and splashing each other. The faucet went off and after a few seconds he heard the boys walk back along the landing, closer, past the bedroom door, to the top of the stairs.

`Peter?' Melinda was shouting from downstairs. 'Can you grab my glasses for me? I left them on my dresser.'

David felt sweat on his face. He pushed as tightly as he could into the space behind the door. As long as the kid didn't switch the light on. The door was open; Peter ran in, straight to the dressing table on the opposite wall and switched a table lamp on. That was fine; it was only lighting up the other side of the room.

II

It was also lighting up the mirror above the table.

The kid saw David.

He screamed.

David ran — he just had to bolt for it, no option. He dropped his bag, left it behind the bedroom door. If anyone gets in the way, he thought — the other boy, the wife — well, he'd just have to get past them.

Down the stairs, two at a time, the front door was in sight.

Suddenly, the English guy was in the way. David stopped on the bottom step.

The man was just looking at him, thinking. David breathed out, unsure what to do. The parents must have heard the kid scream — he didn't have long before they came to see what was wrong. David dodged left, but the Doctor blocked him. He wasn't a big man — no more than David's size — but he was quick, agile. He could take care of himself, David could see that. He could also see that the man was weighing something up in his mind. For a moment, just a brief moment, David thought he was going to let him pass. Then the Doctor smiled, stepped up on to the same stair as David and put his arm around his shoulder, hugging him like a long-lost buddy. Àh! There you are!' he said. 'I wondered where you'd got to.'

The others came through — Scott, Melinda, Ralphie, all narrow-eyed in curiosity.

`Now,' said the Doctor to David. 'You're going to apologise to these nice people.'

David looked at the family's faces. They had as few clues as he did as to what was going on. He looked back at the Doctor, who nodded at him the same way his father used to.

Ìt's okay,' said Melinda encouragingly.

`L.' said David. What else could he do? 'I'm sorry.'

`That's better!' said the Doctor to the family. 'You'll have to excuse my friend. He can be a bit eccentric.'

`Your friend?' asked Scott.

`Yes, I'm sorry. This is, um... Charlie, my travelling companion.'

David stood still — what was this freak up to?

Ì thought he might follow us on,' the Doctor continued, smiling 'You don't mind if he joins us too, do you?'

`No, no, not at all,' said Melinda after a moment. She and Scott both looked doubtful but seemed happy to trust the Doctor. 'I'll set another place at the table.'

She left, shepherding Ralphie with her.

`Look, I don't mean to be unseasonal,' said Scott, turning to David. 'But what were you doing upstairs?'

David's throat had gone dry, but he managed to say, 'Bathroom.'

Ì see,' said Scott. 'Well, it looks like you scared my youngest into next year...'

David turned around. Sat at the top of the stairs was Peter, pale-faced and slightly shaking. He can't have been much more than six.

`Yeah, I'm sorry about that...' said David. 'I didn't really scare you, did I?'

The boy looked quickly down at his father, then stared at David. 'No,' he said firmly.

`You scared me, you know,' said David.

The boy stood up. 'Good,' he said.

`Well, what's done is done,' said Scott. 'Peter, get down here, help your mother.'

The boy ran down the stairs and past them into the kitchen.

`Come on through, Charlie,' said the Doctor, putting an arm around David.

`We're having sandwiches in a bit.'

David stepped into the living room, his eyes scanning around. He was trying to remember what he'd taken from here. Was anything noticeably missing? He didn't think so — maybe he'd grabbed some

spare cash lying on the mantelpiece, but who I was going to spot that?

The Doctor sat down on the couch, Scott in what was clearly his usual armchair.

David sat next to the Doctor, but on the edge of the seat, too nervous to turn to his right, to see the man's face. What was this guy up to?

`Can I get anyone a drink?' Melinda came in carrying a bottle of wine and some glasses.

pp

`Not for me, thank you,' said the Doctor. 'But I'm sure Charlie will have one.

He's quiet, but very friendly when you get to know him. I was the same at his age.'

Melinda poured the drinks and passed one to David. 'There you go,' she said.

She smiled and clinked glasses with him. 'Merry Christmas.'

`Merry Christmas,' said David. He just had to go with it for now — he could make a break for it at the earliest chance.

`So, Charlie,' she said, perching on the arm of Scott's chair, 'how was the Future Club? I haven't been there... ooh, since before we were married. It really was a

"disco" back then, Doctor.' She was teasing the English guy, but he didn't seem to notice.

Òh, I'm sure. Sounds fun,' he said.

'I bet you didn't get in,' continued Melinda, now teasing David. 'I don't know how old you are, but you don't look 2r!'

David laughed nervously.

`They turned you away, didn't they? Don't worry — it happens to us all at your age. I remember once...'

David stopped paying attention and looked at the Christmas tree in the corner of the room. It was huge, the star on its top brushing the ceiling. He'd not spotted it before but he could now see wrapped presents neatly arranged around the tree stand. No, in fact, he had looked earlier — he was going to grab any smaller presents he found. But they hadn't been there. The family must have taken them with them to Melinda's sister's, then put them back under the tree while David was upstairs.

One of the wrapped presents was obviously a baseball bat.

`Charlie?' The Doctor was talking to him. 'It seems dinner is ready.'

Scott and Melinda were walking through to the back room, the two

boys holding on to a leg each of their father as he pretended to fight against them.

David watched through the doorway as Melinda put a big plate of sandwiches on the table.

li

There was no one between him and the front door.

`Hey.' The Doctor was suddenly close, whispering in his ear. 'I know what you're up to, I spotted it as soon as I came in.' There was something hard-edged, menacing about him. He didn't show it when the family was around, but earlier when he'd blocked David's escape, and now they were alone, he looked serious.

David's eyes darted about: the front door, the snow outside the window, the family sitting down in the next room, the baseball bat. He wanted to run, but the Doctor would follow him, cause a commotion.

`Play along,' he continued. 'Make sure everything you took is put back without them noticing. This is a nice family. I won't have you spoiling their Christmas.'

Suddenly he smiled, and all menace and threat was gone. 'Enjoy your evening, and then we'll deal with things afterwards.'

He didn't wait for an answer, joining the others in the dining room. His back was turned. He's testing me, thought David. All I have to do is slowly walk away.

Yes, the family could ID him, but by the time they noticed things were missing he'd be long gone. It was probably time he left Sherman anyway.

But, the Doctor... he was a problem.

He knew what was going on.

He'd come looking for David.

Perhaps dealing with things afterwards wasn't such a bad idea.

David watched the family and the Doctor fight over sandwiches, laugh, tell jokes... Despite himself, he wanted to be a part of it, to have for himself some of the life they were enjoying. That was what he'd been trying to steal from them. And yet they were happy to share...

David followed the Doctor through to the back room and sat down at the table.

Ode to Joy

Jonathan Clements

An Adventure of the Fourth Doctor

The blue door barely opened; it bumped against the base of a high wall built from massive slabs, each bigger than a man. Any closer and he'd never have squeezed out at all. He cursed quietly and edged his way along, his back pressed against the cold, clammy stones. Moonlight filtered down into the shadows of the wall, into a forest, the undergrowth thick with ancient moss.

The cold air smelt of snow. He hugged his overcoat closer, tugging absently at the multicoloured woollen scarf draped around his neck, pulling the brim of his hat as far down as it would go.

Well...' he breathed, before he realised that he was alone. She wasn't with him any more.

`Well, what?' said a woman's voice.

At first he couldn't see anything in the dark wood. But then he made out two large almond eyes, peering out at him from behind the massive roots of an ancient cedar tree.

'Well,' he said, shrugging off the melancholy to flash a charming smile, 'I was just thinking, that if the evening didn't brighten up, I would chalk this one to experience and try somewhere else.'

'You can talk,' she said absently. 'That's remarkable.'

Ì've been doing it all my life,' he said, grinning mischievously at the stranger.

'Nothing remarkable about that.'

'But I can understand you!' she said. She stepped out from behind the tree root, her nine tails wafting playfully behind her. The elongated eyes stared at him without fear and her lips parted, showing rows of little bright fangs. 'Very unusual,' she added.

'Of course.' He smiled. 'But a talking fox is nothing unusual at all, I suppose?'

'Not here,' she said, slowly turning to walk away, with a female assurance that she would be followed.

`Where is here, incidentally?' he asked, lurching a little to overstep a fallen trunk.

`The Garden,' she said, not looking back, hopping over another dead tree.

He steadied himself with a hand, suppressing a yelp of surprise as his fingers found a yielding crust of frost over moss.

`Gardener's on holiday, is he?' he said.

'We like the overgrown,' she said, choosing to perch on a long flat rock by a small pond. 'We like nature unfettered.'

'We?' he asked, reaching the pond, seeing that there was a light up ahead, through more distant trees.

'The Divine,' she said.

He leaned for a moment on a tree for support, looking out from the edge of the 97

forest, at a mansion, dark but for the single light in its porch. Its multiple roofs dropped low towards the ground, before sweeping up like cranes' wings, its corners faced with tiny golden fish, gleaming in the dim light.

He had been here before, long ago, when the annex had still been incomplete, when the trees were not so ancient. When the Toyota Senator was not parked in the driveway.

`The shogun's palace,' he said, with a smile.

The fox tittered to herself; her multiple tails shaking with excitement.

`He is not here,' she said. 'He is gone, gone. A thousand moons ago and more.'

`You don't happen to know what year this is, do you?' he asked.

She stared at him, uncomprehending.

`The man, the man who is a god,' he said. 'The man who lives in that mansion when he is not elsewhere,' he said.

`What of him?' she asked.

`What is his name?'

`He has no name. He has only a reign.'

`What is his *reign, then?'*

Àchieving Peace,' she said. 'But two winters ago.'

`Well, I'll be,' he said. Tokyo, somewhere around 1990.

He took a few steps away from the pond, gesturing to her to remain still, his feet crunching on gravel in a driveway big enough to take a hundred cars, now all but empty.

Ì can see the world outside,' she said, the merest hint of a boast. 'Would you like to?'

`Why, yes!' he said, the smile returning. 'But if memory serves me, such as you can't leave.'

Ì don't want to leave,' she corrected him. 'But I can look.'

The fox led the way, darting from rock to rock, a hidden haphazard staircase of boulders leading up to the wall. He followed her, at first trying to maintain a bipedal stance, then giving up and clambering like her on all fours.

`You know,' he said, breath heavy with exertion, know where we are. This park isn't all that large. It seems...'

`Bigger on the inside than the outside?' she asked.

`Yes.' He smiled.

`Yes,' she agreed. 'I get that a lot.'

As his head peered above the top of the wall, the time came flooding back to him. The city was alive with light, the noise of cars distant, but strangely no horns sounding. Just engines, and occasionally bells.

The wall was thick, as wide as a road, its stone blocks designed to resist adversaries of unknown supernatural might. They could walk along it. They could tap dance on it if they wanted. But both were feeling watchful. The fox curled into a sitting position, her tails bunching behind her. He eased himself gingerly to the cold rock surface, sitting cross-legged.

They watched the city lights, and the pause lengthened into silence.

`Would you like a jelly baby?' he asked.

À baby?' she licked her lips, suddenly eager, short of breath.

À jelly baby,' he said, holding up a morsel that looked like natto curd, but smelt like sugarcane.

She sniffed at it experimentally, then gently extended her tongue, lifting it from his palm. She threw back her head and let it fall on to her back teeth. Her jaws, designed for tearing at flesh, gaped open as her back teeth clamped on it.

He suppressed a laugh.

Ì amuse you?'

'No,' he lied. 'The animal transformation, was... unexpected.'

Ì'll show you transformation,' she said teasingly. 'Look away.' He turned his back, scrunching his eyes shut for good measure. When he turned back, she was a woman.

Admittedly the eyes stretched far too far around to the side of her head to be believable, and her fox ears still poked obviously up through holes in the top of her 192os cloche cap. Her nine tails had somehow grown into a luxurious fur coat, dots of white amid the red. She shrugged in her new disguise and giggled.

`See,' said. 'I am a mo-ga, I am a modahn gahl!'

He laughed too.

`Seventy years ago, maybe,' he said with a shrug. 'A thousand moons,' he added, when he saw her blank look.

Ì would not fool them?' she asked, a trifle hurt.

`Those people down there,' he said, 'they would probably not notice you. Not at first. But they would wonder about the fur.'

`You do not seem impressed,' she said.

Ì know you, you creatures of the Divine,' he said. 'I knew you on the silver worlds, before. You are playing tricks with my eyes, not really changing yourself.'

A phantasm of human lips did its best to pout.

'My vessel,' he said. 'It does the same, not with eyes, but with minds.'

He saw the vestigial fox ears prick up, but she turned with feigned disinterest, staring instead at a distant human couple, sitting beyond the walls, on a bench in the outer park. It was difficult to see much more than that, lampposts outside the shogun's gardens were few and far between, the only night traffic the occasional green taxi. But even at a distance, he could read the signs.

Òh, I *see!'* he said, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. 'This must be Christmas Eve!'

`Kurisutomasu iibu? What does that mean?'

Òh,' he said, 'it means a lot of things. A lot of things.'

`What does it mean to them?'

`Tonight's the night!' he whispered. He knelt on the wall to keep low and out of sight, then thought better of it and lay flat instead. The fox stood next to him, maintaining her human facsimile, but he beckoned her down to his level.

They stared out at the mortals as if they were observing wildlife.

`Christmas Eve,' he whispered. 'In Japan, it's when the shy boy pops the question. Look, see, how he's nervous, how he stalks and ums and

ahhs. You *can* do it!' he stage-whispered to the distant man, who did not have a hope of hearing.

99

`He can do what?' asked the fox.

`They are alone,' explained the Doctor. 'They have come to a place of quiet seclusion.'

Ì see,' said the fox. 'What, after all, could be more quiet and more secluded than the entrance to the walled gardens, when the emperor is not here?'

Èxactly,' said the Doctor.

`So they are lovers?' said the fox.

`Probably.'

`Here to show their devotion to each other...?'

Ì imagine so?'

`By committing ritual suicide?'

`No,' he said, a little louder than he had planned.

`He won't stab her in the throat?'

`No!'

Ànd then tear out his innards to cause an excruciating death?'

Àbsolutely not.'

The fox made a little whimper of disappointment, and fished in the paper bag for another jelly baby. Meanwhile, out in the open area, the salaryman dropped to one knee before his office lady, and there was a high-pitched squeal of excitement.

`He is on his knees,' breathed the fox smugly. 'See, I was right. He is waiting for execution? And she, she is already keening for his loss?'

`No, no.' The Doctor scowled. 'He is asking her to marry him.'

`He is?'

`Yes.'

`Why doesn't he just buy her from her owner like any civilised man"

`Different times.' The Doctor smiled.

`Times are not so different,' said the fox archly. 'The last emperor told Them he was not a god.'

`Yes?'

Tut when this emperor came to power, he still went through The Ceremony. I was there.'

He snorted. She eyed him patiently, and he shrugged.

`Ceremony, no Ceremony,' he said. 'It doesn't change what you really are.'

`Yes,' she said in agreement with the negative statement. He thought it was cute.

He turned back to look at the couple in the distance, who were now cuddling in a wholly scrutable fashion.

`Good luck,' he whispered. 'You'll need it.'

`They will?' asked the Fox.

`You wait,' he said. 'Right now, they're spending money they don't have.'

'In the Ginza?'

Ìn the Ginza.'

Tut the Ginza is where they make money. It's the silver mint.'

He shook his head.

Ìt's fake. They are lying about the worth of their lands, and then borrowing money with it.'

`Land here is worth a lot of money.'

He laughed. 'This mansion,' he said. 'The area within these walls,

where the mortals are not allowed to come.'

`Yes?'

`This park in the middle of Tokyo, reserved for the emperor's use.'

`Yes?'

Ìf they sold it, it would be worth more than California.'

`Than what?'

`Than the western coast of the Land of Rice.'

Will they sell it?' She looked worried. 'I have nowhere to go. I am a fox!'

`They won't,' he said quietly.

`Look at me!' she wailed, her voice rising. 'You say I cannot pass for them. I look to the horizon, and I see the lights of houses on the Tama Hills! Houses! Full of humans and their —'

She paused, looking at him conspiratorially.

`Their stench!' she said. 'Have you smelled it? Now, there is nothing, but I have been close on those occasions when they have been let in. The guardians and the merchants, and whatever those new humans are. They smell of the congealed fat from cows' milk.'

`Butter?'

`Bataa, as you say.'

`They will not sell this place,' he said. 'You are safe here.'

`They will not?'

`Fashions change,' he said. 'All girls are modahn gals now. They wear raa-raa skirts now and trakku suutsu. And in a few years they will be body conscious.'

`They'll be what?'

`Bodicon,' he laughed. 'You wouldn't need a fur coat then.'

Àn d then?'

`Golden hair and brown skin?'

`Like the barbarian courtesans?'

Èr... Yes.'

Ì shall stay a *modahn gahl,'* she said. 'Do you have any more of those babies?'

He held out the bag, and she snaked a delicate human-seeming hand inside for one. She studied it in the moonlight, smiling She popped it into her mouth, throwing back her head once more, trapping it in a vice of her back teeth, her eyes rolling back to the whites as she gnawed at it.

He thought it fine for a fox, but unbecoming for a lady.

Ì like these,' she said.

`Wait!' he said. 'Don't you hear it?'

They both paused, their noses up in the air, her ears swivelling in search of the sound. There was music, drifting across from a distant hall.

Ì know this melody,' she said. 'It is the thing they call Daiku.'

`Big Nine?'

`Big Nine! Yes. Every year, just after the ceremony of the longest night, they play it in the halls. I hear it.'

'Beethoven's Ninth,' he said. He knew it. The marriage proposal on the bench wasn't a fluke. It was Christmas Eve.

'Who?' she asked.

'The music, it's Beethoven's Ninth. It is the other thing the Japanese do every Christmas. There are performances of it all over the country. Good money if you can speak enough German to sing along in one of the choirs.'

`German?'

'It's *Ode to Joy*. If you've heard it every year for a century, you must know it by now.'

'I know the tune, not the words.'

Òh,' he said realising. 'Of course. But this time, I think you should listen.'

' Why?'

Àt Christmas,' he said, 'people give gifts.'

`Like the edible babies.'

'Like the edible babies,' he said. 'But my vessel has a gift it gives all the time.'

'Which is what?'

Ìf you are near it, then you can understand the languages of others.'

'Like me understanding you.'

'And me understanding you.'

'Will I be able to understand Big Nine?'

'If you are quiet,' he said, 'and if you listen very carefully...'

The music rose up, and swelled to its crescendo, and suddenly a male voice boomed out.

The fox was in rapture. She understood at last, perched tensely on the top of the wall, her eyes wide and unblinking. After a time, the music slammed to a stop in the distant hall, to meet with the sound of people slapping their hands one against the other. A vulgar sign of approbation, but typical of such times. But the fox had stopped caring, because she had heard the words.

'That's amazing!' she said. 'I never knew what it meant! A barbarian wrote that?

You are toying with me!'

`No, it was written by a... as you say, barbarian.'

'But they said it. They sang it! "Beyond the stars lie his pavilions." How

do they know? Who told them?'

'I think,' said the Doctor carefully, 'that it is just a coincidence.'

'I like this barbarian custom.'

'Good.'

Ì have enjoyed your visit, and your vessel's gift.'

'You're welcome.'

'I also greatly enjoyed the edible babies.'

'I know.'

Àre there any left?'

He peered into the paper bag. 'Just one.'

'May I have it.'

He smiled. 'Oh, go on, then.'

Nobody's Gift

Kate Orman

An Adventure of *the Seventh* Doctor

8 February 1480

Three days after Tochtli is born, the Doctor buries the boy's umbilical cord in a swamp on a planet without a name.

Thirty years later, a different Doctor visits Tochtli's feather shop in the market in Tenochtitlan, capital city of the Aztec Empire. These days he's a small man, quiet, with a Paisley tie, and a white hat pushed over muddled dark curls. In the pocket of his jacket he carries a gift.

There's nothing for sale in the market, not at this time of year. Time has paused in the awkward gap in the Mexica calendar: 18 months of twenty days equals 360

days, five short of a year. For five Nothing days, life stops.

Tochtli is there anyway, gossiping lazily with the other merchants, enjoying the quiet of the holiday. He's a rich man now, travelling the empire with his wares, trading cloaks and head dresses for cocoa beans, cocoa beans for exotic plumes.

The Doctor watches quietly until they see him. The other merchants retreat to their own shops, glancing back at Tochtli. This tourist with his cloud-white clothes and sky-blue eyes must be one of the feather-seller's contacts from a distant corner of the empire. No visitor could be lucky today.

Tochtli gets up. The other merchants are hungover, but he's stone cold sober.

Tochtli looks him up and down, and the Doctor sees a suspicion cross the Aztec's face.

The merchant skips the usual formal pleasantries of Mexica manners. 'Who are you looking for?' he says.

`Nobody,' the Doctor tells him.

Tochtli glances to the side, where his neighbours are listening hard as they can.

`You'd better come to my house, then,' he tells the Doctor.

The Doctor remembers tiny Tochtli, born an Aztec month early, wailing hotly in between periods ofdangerous silence. His widowed mother begging the Doctor to set her son's destiny, to bury the cord that had bound her to him. Bury it deep in a distant battlefield, amongst soldiers buried where they'd fallen. She strokes the infant's soft, fevered face. Make him a fighter, Doctor, make him fight.

The Doctor follows Tochtli through the quiet streets. Most people are at home, recovering from the wild drinking of the last night of the year. The merchant glances back at him a couple of times. The Doctor knows Tochtli is trying to work out if he's going to have to kill him. He won't be sure until they've spoken.

A foursome of soldiers swagger around a corner, spotting them at once. They're showy birds, these elite young men in their feathers, their jewellery, their scars. In 103

an instant Tochtli and the Doctor are surrounded by Tenochtitlan's finest, preening and fluttering like butterflies, brilliant, gorgeous,

doomed to the briefest of lives.

Ìs this all you're selling today?' says one. He tugs at the Doctor's hair. 'Don't think much of his plumage.' The boys titter and poke and prod.

Ì'll give you two cocoa beans.'

`Too late, he's already been plucked!'

`Say, merchant, did you capture him all by yourself?'

'No — the merchant was the one who got caught!'

Tochtli says nothing, examining his feet, his shoulders rounding as though he's trying to become as small as possible.

The Doctor looks round at the boys, catching each of their glances in turn. His eyes are blue as the sky, blue as the lake, as turquoise beads, as macaw feathers.

`Today's a bad day for fighting,' he says coolly. 'An unlucky day for any kind of dispute.'

The boys giggle, and mimic his voice. But the swarm flows away again, leaving the Doctor and Tochtli alone in the street. The merchant gives a little sigh, and walks on.

The merchant has a fine house. His wives do the best they can to provide refreshments, given that no fires are lit in the long, unlucky Shabbat. The women retreat, leaving the men alone, sitting opposite each other at the table.

Tochtli says, 'You knew my mother.'

Ì delivered you,' says the Doctor. That clinches his identity, but it doesn't mean Tochtli can relax. An ally one time can be an enemy the next. 'I don't know how much she told you.'

Ì know you worked together after my father died,' says Tochtli. 'I know you both stopped the infestation of a flowering weed that would have choked the city.

People say it grew over half the lake before it was killed.'

Ìt would have grown over half the world,' said the Doctor. 'It was sent to do just that. To drive out the human race.'

À weapon,' says Tochtli. 'A coward's weapon.'

The Doctor doesn't disagree. 'The last time I saw your mother was shortly after you were born.'

`She told me. She asked you to bury my umbilical cord on a battlefield. Every mother asks someone to do that for her son.' Tochdi tilts his head. He never takes his eyes off the Doctor once. 'But you never did.'

`What makes you say that?'

'I never went to war,' says Tochtli. 'Never cracked the skull of a barbarian. Never dragged home an enemy for sacrifice. How could I, born on a day like today? Little Amaca, little Nobody, born on a Nothing day, with a Nothing fate to look forward to. My mother gave me a second name to cover up the first, and everyone was fooled, but it didn't make any difference. You brought me out of her womb a month too early.'

The Doctor doesn't try to apologise or explain. 'Perhaps that was my fate.'

Tochtli doesn't react. He still hasn't decided whether to kill the Doctor. 'My fate was to become one of the merchants. Bribing those strutting quetzals with feasts and gifts.' His lip curls. 'When the soldiers travel, they bring back sacrifices, they risk everything. We only bring back our own wealth. We risk nothing.'

He leaves the statement hanging in the air, and now the Doctor knows what Tochtli wants to know. He says nothing.

Tochtli says, 'She never saw you again.'

The Doctor smiles regret. 'I'm like lightning,' he says.

`How so?'

The Doctor looks up at the Aztec. 'I mean, I seldom visit the same place more than once.'

Tochtli spreads his hands, indicating where they are.

The Doctor says, 'I've brought you a gift.'

The Doctor remembers trudging across that sticky alien swamp, stepping over knotted air roots and protruding bones, both gone the same yellowed colour from mud and time. Here and there is a scrap of metal, a bit of cloth. The sky is a uniform blank of cloud.

He aims for the carcass of a troop transport, rusting square skeleton rearing from the ooze. He's wrapped little Amaca's umbilicus carefully in Heqatian preserving cloth to prevent its corruption, sealing the precious bundle with packing tape and popping it softly into his jacket pocket.

The Doctor's wellingtons press dangerously deep into the alien ground. He's had to set the TARDIS to hover slightly, so that its weight doesn't drag it down into the muck. It stands behind him, the only clean and living thing to the horizons.

The Doctor remembers Tochtli's mother Xoco. The bonepuppets killed her husband when he caught them scattering the lethal seeds into the lake. The moment he died, face pressed into the brackish water, she knew it.

Tochtli's father was a merchant. He visited priests and nobles in towns across the empire, building connections, distributing gifts. He brought back the trinkets they gave him in exchange, and handed them to his wife.

Xoco would hold them in her slender hands, plucking information from the baubles like a spoonbill snapping up fish. It would start with the people who had made the object, then each person who had touched it, then at last the gift-giver.

Often they'd held it only for a moment, only long enough to leave a glimmer of themselves behind. It was their assistants and lieutenants who left the best information.

Her ability to draw out those grains of knowledge had saved the lives of several Mexica merchants. Outside Tenochtitlan, every merchant was suspected as a spy for the empire: only Tochtli's father escaped suspicion, proven innocent time and again. Thanks to their teamwork two towns were successfully subjugated, a costly rebellion averted and a plot against the emperor himself unravelled.

But the greatest thing Xoco ever did was hold a scrap of plastic from the bonepuppet garbage, lazily left half-buried in the jungle by the lake, and recite for an 1 05

hour every detail of their plan. Her eyes grew wide when she rattled off the biological specifications of the deadly seeds, words without meanings, as beyond comprehension as anything the gods ever did. She trembled *a* little, but she never stopped the flow of words.

With that intelligence, the Doctor stopped the planet being turned into a garden of weeds. He drove off her husband's killers, their easy victory turned to ashes.

Three months later, he helped her bring little Nobody into the world. The baby was silent, frowning wetly in his hands, before letting out a wail like a scream of horror.

The Doctor doesn't call it a birthday present, or a Christmas present: it would mean nothing to Tochtli.

He unfolds the Paisley handkerchief carefully. The gemstone is heavy, big enough to fill his palm. It's smooth, green-yellow, oval with one pointed tip.

Tochtli looks at it. 'Where did it come from?' he says.

`The bonepuppets,' says the Doctor.

Tochtli stares: until now, he has only ever heard his mother use that word, and she only ever whispered it. 'I think they're planning to unleash their killer vines again.

Not here — far away. But they gave me this to prove their good intentions.'

He holds it out. Tochtli draws in a deep breath, and takes the thing in his hands.

Ìt's a seed,' he says at once. 'A seed that looks like a jewel.'

The information comes rushing through his fingers as he brushes them over its surface. This seed really is harmless. A healthy crop, that can be planted safely side by side with others. It will refresh the soil.

It's a decoy, he sees that at once. The bonepuppets have millions of the deadly seeds stored, waiting, ready to be planted when the soil is at its best and their victims are at their most trusting.

`They're lying,' he tells the Doctor. 'This seed will only prepare the way for their new weapon.'

Tochtli fumbles and drops the fragile thing, and when the Doctor reaches out to catch it, the Aztec plucks the blade from beneath his cloak and slashes.

The Doctor moves quick and lithe as an ocelot. The obsidian knife only catches his thumb, drawing a brick-red line along the skin. He twists and turns. Tochtli's punch lands harmlessly on his upper arm as he turns clear of the Aztec's rage, somehow holding the knife now. Tochtli knocks the table aside. Another twist and the Doctor has a foot between Tochtli's ankles, sending him sprawling to the floor, the glassy knife a hand's breadth from the Aztec's throat.

In the doorway Tochtli's wives scream.

`Kill me,' says the merchant.

The Doctor says a word that makes Tochtli's ears ring, and the knife and the seed both shatter into splinters.

They roll apart. Tochtli is surprised to discover he's winded, as though punched in the solar plexus. He sits up, fighting to catch his breath, his wives hovering around him.

`Like mother, like son,' says the Doctor. 'You've inherited her psychometry.'

`You know too much,' gasps Tochtli. 'You know *too* much! Only the emperor knows I have her gift. Even my wives don't know!' he shouts hoarsely, sending the women scurrying out of the room.

`You followed in your parents' footsteps, didn't you? You're a spy for the empire too. Travelling as a merchant — a second job, to cover up your first job. Bringing home the intelligence.'

`Spat on by warriors like you,' snarls Tochtli.

The Doctor startles, as though he's been slapped. 'No! Oh, no, Tochtli, not at all. Not me.' He draws a long breath. 'To risk your life when nobody sees — when no one gives you credit for it — that's far braver than any preening warrior in his fancy feathers.'

Tochtli reaches out. The Doctor meets him halfway, hand outstretched.

The Aztec need only run his fingernails along the back of the Doctor's wrist to know. 'You won't betray me,' he says.

The Doctor stands. 'I've got to go. Now I know what the bonepuppets are up to, I can stop them in their tracks.' Tochtli doesn't get up, still catching his breath. 'You are a soldier, Tochtli. In your solitary, difficult way.' The Aztec blinks. 'You've just saved another world,' the Doctor tells him. 'Hundreds of thousands of people.'

`Thank you for the gift,' says Tochtli hoarsely.

`Thank you,' says the Doctor.

At the troop transport's rotten hulk, the Doctor pulls a folding shovel from his pocket, gives it a flick to straighten it out, and digs a miniature grave in the mud.

It's surprisingly difficult. The ooze is heavy, and water leaches quickly into the hole.

He drops the package into the hole, already half-filled with water, and scrapes the mud back over the top.

He pushes the filthy shovel into the ground, as if to mark the spot. He pauses for a moment, alone on a battlefield the galaxy's breadth from Earth. There is no sound, not even a breeze.

The Doctor turns and heads back to the waiting TARDIS.

107

The Innocents

Marc Platt

An Adventure of the Doctor,

with Susan

The Doctor smoothed back his white hair, grasped his jacket lapels, thumbs pointing skyward, and stepped out into the moonlit alley. He was directly in the path of the advancing soldier.

A soldier? A ruffian in a coarse leather jerkin, more like, with a tarnished metal K helmet and a stubby sword. A hired thug, then, with little need of the drill yard to teach him his business. From the street beyond came the shouts of other soldiers, banging on barricaded

doors, overturning a handcart, smashing jars of olive oil.

The ruffian, who had been casting about in the shadows, noticed the Doctor and found a victim at last. 'Where are they?' he bellowed as he lumbered up. 'Where're the children?'

Àll gone,' declared the Doctor, and he stood his ground until, by the moon, he could see the bristles on the man's chin and smell the beer on his breath. He felt the sword pressing cold and wet against his own throat.

`Where've you hid them, old man' We've got a job to do.'

'Do you think I care about your Tetrarch's disgusting orders? There are no children here. Now be off with you!' Such determination. For a moment, the Doctor even believed his own lies. He locked eyes hard with the ruffian, determined to out-stare his opponent. The night was warm. The soldier had been drinking heavily, understandable given his task. He swayed under the Doctor's silent defiance. The blade began to withdraw just a little. The Doctor granted himself the tiniest smile of satisfaction.

Out of the shadows behind him came the brief squeal of a protesting infant. A grin gnarled the bully's face. With one big hand, he shovelled his opponent sideways and advanced.

The Doctor sprawled in the dust. 'Susan! Susan! Lock the doors!' But the soldier had reached the rough-hewn entrance to a tiny hovel. He pushed at the door and a line of golden light opened to him. The child's cry came again, and then, in a commotion of hooves and heehaws, a large donkey barrelled out of the doorway, butting the soldier in the stomach as it went. As the man stumbled back, grappling **at** the air to gain his balance, a woman wrapped in rough peasant clothes in the Classical style billowed past, shrieking curses at the wayward animal. The soldier found his feet and levelled his sword, but as he reached for the woman, a heavy pot crashed against his neck and knocked him senseless.

A young man with a dark cloak and shoulder-length hair wiped his hands and stepped neatly over his prone victim. Even in the moon shadow, his face was handsome, with a refined aquiline nose. He reached out and helped the Doctor to **his** feet. 'The whole town's thick with these butchers.'

`Most timely, Leonardo. Thank you.' The Doctor dusted himself down, irritably 109

waving away any more assistance from his saviour. 'It's not safe here. I think it best we were on our way.'

Leonardo dabbled his hands awkwardly. 'Doctor, thank you for waiting for me.

I know that I dragged you to this God-forsaken place, but I...'

Òh, never mind that now.' The Doctor was heading for the door on other business, and then he suddenly stopped and glanced back. 'God-forsaken seems an unlikely description. Did you find what you wanted?'

Leonardo studied the ground for a moment. 'Well... in truth it wasn't...' he began, and then the peasant woman was barging past, scolding the errant donkey that came trotting behind her. She pushed at the door to the tiny stable, far too small a stable for the light and noise that came from within. As she disappeared inside, there was a burst of angry shouting and the clank of weapons from along the alley.

`Quickly!' The Doctor bundled Leonardo through the door and slammed it behind them.

The guards concertinaed to a halt, breathless and bewildered as, with the braying of a dozen donkeys, the little stable shimmered and dissolved into the Judean night.

Susan hardly knew where to turn. The Doctor's latest mercy mission was rapidly becoming a nightmare. Everywhere she went, in the console room, in the galley, in the corridors, there seemed to be children crawling, toddling or running. In fact, there were only three: Reuben, Job and little Milcah. It just felt like a dozen.

She didn't count tiny Uriel, who was permanently clamped to his mother's breast.

The whole TARDIS smelt of milk. But as Grandfather kept reminding her, she had grandchildren of her own at home. Not that you'd have known that from her crop-haired gamine features. `So you should know how to keep the little dears amused,'

he'd insisted. How odd that since she had started to travel with him, all those old Gallifreyan memories seemed to have slipped away. 'Best left behind,'

Grandfather had said gently and she was sure he was right. He always

insisted he was.

Leonardo had been trying to sketch the infants, but when the little ones refused to stay still, he got exasperated, snapped shut his notebook and stalked off to his room. 'The artistic temperament,' commented Grandfather with a wry smile. 'It takes *one* to know one.'

So Susan busied herself introducing Mrs Simeon, the children's mother, to the benefits of nappies, albeit nappies improvised from the contents of the wardrobe.

The poor woman was undoubtedly grateful, apparently regarding Susan and her grandfather as some sort of guardian angels who had delivered her family from the Tetrarch's murderous soldiers. But how Susan wished she would concentrate on restraining her offspring and not keep running her hands over the TARDIS's fixtures and fittings in wide-eyed wonderment. Grandfather muttered that they should have brought many more than just one family As it was, he was on constant duty in the console room, burping the littlest one, trying to read to the 110

older ones from his own totally unsuitable adventure novels, always ready to smack wandering fingers away from the instruments.

And now the TARDIS food machine was playing up too. It just couldn't get the hang of rusks. Or hay for the donkey, which Mrs Simeon had refused to leave behind. She seemed more concerned about the poor beast than leaving her husband. 'He has flocks to tend,' she said. '**I** have the children and the donkey. It **is** bitter water we drink.'

The donkey was stabled in one of the larger storage cupboards from where it brayed its protest and slid its hooves on the smooth floor. 'Oh, dear, oh, dear,'

muttered Grandfather as he surveyed its latest mess. 'If only we still had Badger here. He was so good at... cleaning Still, it'll be good for the roses.' And he went to fetch the shovel.

But they didn't doubt what they'd done. Not for one moment. They were just not t quite sure what to do next.

'Susan?' She stopped sewing nappies in mid-stitch. The Doctor stood in the doorway, his brow furrowed with concern. 'Where is he?'

'Who?'

'Leonardo, of course.'

She shrugged. 'I thought he was in his room.'

'The TARDIS manual is missing.'

'Oh, dear,' she said, not really surprised.

His fingers were drumming together with indignation. 'I deliberately hid it from him. That young man is rapidly becoming a liability.'

Susan smiled. She couldn't help it. 'Grandfather, it was you who invited him to **join us.** One of the most fertile minds in the universe, you said. An ideal opportunity for you to converse with an equal.'

The Doctor harrumphed. 'He's taking liberties. He's into everything. Nothing's **safe.** He seems to forget he's our guest.'

'He's very young,' she added.

'Bah!'

'That was a surprise, you know. In all the pictures, he's old and grizzly. I think **he's** fun.'

'Oh, yes. Too charming, handsome and clever for anyone's good. And I don't like that notebook of his. Goodness knows what he's putting in it. Just about everything, as far as I can see.' A sudden chill caught the Doctor's voice. 'You did **lock** the library, didn't you?'

'Yes. Just like we agreed.'

'We mustn't let him discover even one inch about his own future. That could be so dangerous. He's quite self-important enough as he is.'

'Erm, Grandfather...' she muttered, nodding past him.

But he was on a roll. 'Yet he has an amazing, inquisitive mind. Teeming **with ideas.** Which is ironic, really, considering he's renowned for hardly ever finishing anything. I suppose that's what happens when you have too many irons in the fire.'

There was a polite cough. The subject of the Doctor's dissertation was standing 111

at his shoulder. 'Leonardo, my dear fellow,' he floundered. Ì, erm... do

hope the children haven't been disturbing your studies.' He noticed the ancient and heavy tome that the young man was holding. The legend `TARDIS MANUAL' was embossed in gold on the battered cover.

'I managed to rescue this,' Leonardo said. 'An important thing, I think. It shows the workings of your ship. It was in the cupboard with the donkey. Not too badly chewed, thank heaven. And only a little wet.'

The Doctor managed a half-hearted laugh as he accepted the damp volume, handling it by his fingertips. There was a moment's embarrassed silence.

Leonardo was studying the floor again. Not meeting their eyes. 'I am grateful, Doctor, for the places you have shown me. So many wonders. Such visions and worlds are beyond the imagination.'

'Did you find what you wanted in the town?' ventured Susan.

'Of course,' agreed the Doctor. 'Your commission. That's why we came. I forgot in all the excitement. So did you find your inspiration?'

Leonardo picked at his tunic. Ìf the fathers at San Donato want their altarpiece, they had better find another painter.'

`The actual event was not up to expectations, I take it.' The Doctor slipped a hand on to Leonardo's shoulder. 'Well, never mind, my boy. History, when you experience it, is rarely as picturesque as it's been painted. Hmm"

'Grandfather!' protested Susan. 'Do you know what you're saying?'

`Well, of course I know,' snapped the Doctor. 'But a young fellow like Leonardo here. He's creative. He'll think of something, I'm sure.'

Leonardo pushed away the hand. `Will ? he snapped. 'You tell me, Doctor. I can't think at all. Apparently I have too many lions in the fire.' And he stalked away towards his room.

`Lions? What's he talking about?' complained the Doctor. 'Susan? Have you upset him?'

The slam of Leonardo's door provoked an immediate and enduring chorus of protest from the children. Mrs Simeon started shouting. The donkey joined in.

And Susan, shaking her head in disbelief, started to laugh out loud.

'Oh, really,' complained the Doctor. 'This is unendurable. Someone had better do something and be quick about it!'

The drab light of morning seeped through the skeletal trees of Regents Park.

London was unseasonably warm for December, but there were no other children at the playground. The TARDIS, shaped like a Christmas tree with coloured lights and parcels, was parked next to a seesaw. The children and their mother, wrapped in a bizarre selection from the wardrobe, emerged through the branches of the ship and stared at the array of gaudy contraptions. Mrs Simeon eyed the place warily, but the youngsters instantly understood and were soon testing the roundabouts and swings and climbing frames to their full durable ability. Their laughter and shouts soon began to dispel memories of the bloody fate from which they had been snatched. They put the donkey out to grass on the lawns and for once it showed its gratitude by keeping quiet.

112

Susan watched with some amusement as the Doctor dutifully took it upon himself to try out each facility in turn, with particular and repeated emphasis on the slide. His chortling and cries of Wheeee!` totally undermined the weight of his proclaimed 'scientific' investigation.

It took Leonardo about four-and-a-half minutes before his insatiable curiosity got the better of him. Susan had reckoned at least ten. He emerged through the TARDIS's tinselled branches like Mr Stanley from the Congo. Furled in his dark green cloak, his notebook in hand, he was soon wandering round the playground, peering into the innards of the roundabout, testing the giant springs with their cartoon-animal seats. But he still looked uneasy. That natural enthusiasm which had burned so fiercely in his glance was dulled and slack.

The light's dark here,' he muttered. 'More like dusk. Difficult to catch. The way the clouds are draped across the sky like wet damask. We must be far north.'

`London,' called the Doctor from the top of the slide. 'Some 50o years ahead of your time.'

Àh, yes. England. Misty and grey. Chiaroscuro.'

Ànything to keep the children happy.' The Doctor slid down and

dismounted.

'I knew they'd take to it. Like ducks to water.' And a sudden smile twinkled into his eyes. 'Susan, dear? You stay and keep an eye on our guests. Leonardo and I have Important business to attend to. Now where did I put that bread?'

'That's the trouble with ducks,' observed the Doctor some time later. 'They always want more.' He was standing beside a large pond, throwing scraps of failed TARDIS rusks to a small rabble of squabbling birds.

Leonardo stood next to him, half-heartedly joining in the feeding frenzy. 'What about the children?' he asked.

The Doctor smiled. 'At least let's give them a bit of fun before we take them back **home,** eh?'

'What?' Leonardo turned and glared. 'You intend to return them? After we saved **them** from the Childermas? That is monstrous! Do you want them slaughtered **after** all?!'

`Like the others we left behind?' snapped the Doctor and he flung another rusk **Into** the centre of the pond, sending the ducks scrabbling. 'What sort of butcher **do you take me for, hmm?'**

Leonardo glowered at the strange houses in the distance. 'I apologise, Doctor,'

he said, barely clipping his anger.

'There wasn't time. Just be thankful we saved one family!' The Doctor's **knuckles** were white, clutching his bag of rusks. His old eyes burned with sorrow.

And then his voice mellowed. 'We'll slip the children back home a few months **after** they left. Once all the fuss has died down. They'll be fine, you'll see.'

Leonardo nodded sullenly. He stared up at the gloomy sky from where the **tumble** of some great engine throbbed down through the curtain of cloud. 'Flying **machines?'** he asked.

'Primitive ones,' agreed the Doctor. 'Nothing like those flocks of ornithopters I took you to see on Avandrium Major.'

1 13

Leonardo peered again at the line of buildings half-hidden by the trees that circled the park. 'It's a game you play, Doctor. Changing the future. Are you a wizard? Or an angel?'

Ì'll have you know I've only ever changed things for the better!' The Doctor dug into his paper bag and dropped half a rusk for the mallard that was pecking at his shoe. 'Still smarting over your little excursion into town, eh? We didn't interfere on that one, remember.' He softened his tone. `So what did you see, hmm?'

But Leonardo shook his head and kept silent.

Òh, well.' The Doctor sighed. 'We all face a test of faith sometimes. Look at me.

I spent far too long at home locked away in my own head. It was dear Susan's faith that rescued me and dragged me out of that darkness. And now I have the whole universe to explore. And so much lost time to make up. It could have been very different, oh, yes. Anything could have happened. Or nothing. But don't wander alone, Leonardo. The future is a dangerous place. And its dangers are very different from the dangers of the past.'

`My future too? Have you changed that?'

The Doctor stared at the water where the bare trees and grey sky were caught in shimmering parody of themselves. 'You know, this planet never fails to surprise me. Whenever I visit, it always finds ways of being more advanced than I expected.

The place never stays still for a minute. Intriguing, eh? Just by looking at humanity, you'd never imagine that they could be so adept at progress. And rather endearing too.'

There was a chorus of protests from the ducks as a large goose flapped down into their midst, sending them scurrying.

Ì am part of that humanity, Doctor,' observed Leonardo, greatly irritated.

`Yes, yes. Indeed you are, my boy. Something to celebrate, hmm?'

Ànd has my future changed?' he demanded. 'Will I still be the great man that you keep suggesting? Who is this great man Leonardo, eh? What does he do?'

The Doctor effected a smile, but it was a cold smile, masking the threat. 'Don't ask, Leonardo. There are some things that it's just better not to see. Whenever you've had enough, I can take you back home.' And the smile softened into a persuasive fondness. 'I was wondering if I might take a look at that notebook of yours. Just to see your ideas, of course...'

A loud honking noise interrupted his pleading. He snatched away his rusk bag as the goose made a grab for it. 'Be off with you, or it'll be Christmas stuffing and giblets before bedtime!' And he turned back to Leonardo.

`Grandfather!' Susan was hurrying up the path towards them. 'Please, come quickly!'

The Doctor gave a large huff of exasperation.

It appeared that in his absence, the donkey had got loose again and was working methodically through the flowerbeds, eating next spring's wallflowers.

Leonardo watched as the Doctor joined in the general melee. An angry park keeper was remonstrating with Mrs Simeon, who was vociferously remonstrating back.

The children were starting to cry again.

4.1

There were other people gathering now. Figures in dull, joyless clothes as befitting the drab climate, lingering to enjoy the entertainment just as any crowd in Florence would stop to watch and cheer a street brawl. Leonardo studied the strangely shaped dogs that they kept on thin ropes, and the coloured bags of strange shiny material that they carried. Two likely youths with peaked skullcaps trundled past, balancing on low boards set with little runners. One of them raised two fingers and laughed. Leonardo raised one finger back.

And then he noticed the machine that the shouting guard of the park had abandoned against a line of railings. A little fizz of excitement and pleasure warmed his heart. Two large wheels set in a frame of metal rods with another small wheel and chain that drove the large wheel at the back. He understood the principles of the machine as if it was his own invention.

The park keeper stepped back in total confusion. The Royal Parks Regulations, whose by-laws he was adept at quoting to the letter, contained nothing about the unsolicited appearance of Christmas trees, let alone the cantankerous old man, the young woman, a middle-eastern mother and her children (probably illegal immigrants) and the donkey (probably escaped from the zoo), who were all disappearing impossibly into its luxuriously decorated branches.

Ànd a merry Christmas to you too!' shouted the old man as he shepherded the group into the tree.

It was some sort of trick, the keeper guessed, probably done with holograms or CGI. He started tapping at his mobile, aiming to call for assistance. And then he saw his bike. It was wobbling away along the path towards the park's Outer Circle, ridden very badly by a long-haired man in a cape.

The keeper yelled a very un-festive expletive and set off in pursuit.

Beside the tree, Susan saw Leonardo's bid for escape. 'Grandfather!'

The Doctor lost count of the children. He saw the dwindling Leonardo gathering speed. 'Susan! Stop him, dear!'

Susan started to run. As she took a short cut across the flowerbeds, she heard **the** Doctor calling, 'Don't let him find anything out! For his own sake!'

The keeper had stopped at the boundary of the park and was barking orders into **his** mobile phone. As Susan skirted round him on the other side of the road, he **saw** her and glared. 'He went that way,' she called and pointed in the opposite direction. He swore and she ran again, leaving him far behind, pelting along the pavement as if she was at least a hundred years younger.

She reached the main road and saw the bicycle first. It was lying in the gutter **With** its front wheel mangled. Leonardo was standing beside the road, apparently **unhurt,** hands over his ears, staring at the relentless barrage of cars and lorries.

Far more traffic than she expected. The cars were sleeker, more modern, less **chunky** than she remembered. Leonardo's face was a mix of terror and ecstasy.

`Sancta Maria, why are they so loud?' he shouted to her. 'There must be fires **Inside.** Look at the smoke.'

`Combustion engines. Grandfather says they're primitive.' She took his arm and tried to pull him away.

`Primitive? They are wonders compared to my time!'

A red double-decker bus had pulled up at the traffic lights. Leonardo produced his notebook and stepped out in front of the bus, peering through the grille at the noisy engine. Susan had to all but wrestle him out of the road. 'We have to get back. It isn't safe.'

Ì must know about these things,' he insisted.

Ìt's just a London bus. You've already seen far more complex machines than this. What about the dry-sea ships of the Lordlings of Red Weather?'

`But that was another place among the constellations. This is on my own world.

I have to learn about it.'

Susan began to despair. 'Grandfather will be waiting for us!' And then she noticed his notebook, lying in the gutter where he had dropped it. She stooped to retrieve it, but he was quicker, filching it out of her grasp.

`Your grandfather promised he would show me these things. Please, Susan.

Don't deny me this. Just a little while. What harm can it do?'

She faltered, unsure. It was hard to deny such desperate pleading. He was as bad as Grandfather. And then she heard the wail of a siren. There was a blue flashing light in the distance, approaching from the park. 'The police,' she muttered.

`Come on.'

And she hurried him the only way they could go, across the road between the waiting traffic and deeper into the grey city.

The shops were heaving with shoppers despite the onset of a gentle drizzle. Swags of little lights were strung across the streets, flickering and twinkling above in the shape of giant snowflakes, and reflecting below in the wet pavement.

Susan clung on tightly to Leonardo, terrified of losing him again. And he clung on to her too, his grip tightening with excitement and astonishment until it hurt.

They had already come much farther than she had meant, but he was like a large puppy, straining at the leash. She couldn't stop him, but she could at least slow him down.

He pressed his face against the glass of the shop windows, staring at the displays of 'Last-Minute Xmas Bargains'.

`There were never markets like this.' He grinned. 'Do things just grow and grow for ever? And why are the buildings so hard and ugly?' He gave a shrug. 'But then you could never buy imagination.'

He ignored Susan's protests that they should leave and pressed on into the vast, covered marketplace. He dragged her past stands of coloured silk scarves and sunglasses. The whole market was festooned with tinsel and giant coloured baubles. 'Just like the TARDIS tree,' he said. 'What is all this for? What festival is it?'

Ìt's Christmas,' Susan told him.

`No.' He laughed, not believing it for one moment. And then he stopped and a huge grin cracked across his face. Amid the stacks of foil-covered parcels, there was a staircase and it was moving.

Susan worried even more. If he really did explode with excitement, she would get caught by the shrapnel. He clambered on to the staircase, laughing aloud as it bore him heavenward. Other shoppers stared. 'Sorry. Artistic temperament,'

apologised Susan.

`Beyond my dreams!' Leonardo was hanging half over the edge as they passed a downward-moving staircase that intersected their own at its

mid-point. 'So simple. I'd often thought of this, but never dreamed I'd see one actually working.'

He bounded off at the top and there was another stairway to take him to even dizzier heights. 'How does it work?' He was trying to poke between the steps.

Susan had a feeling that he would be content to spend the rest of the day just riding up and down.

There was an 'emergency stop' button at the top. Susan slapped his hand away as he reached for it. 'You're as bad as the children.'

He shrugged and looked round, his eyes widening again.

Oh, now what, she thought.

Row upon row of computer screens with colourful cartoon images. Things were advancing so fast these days. Hard to keep up. Leonardo was staring from one to another. 'More machines with no moving parts. Run on bottled lightning. Like the electric mirror in the TARDIS.'

`You mean the scanner,' she said.

`But the colours and composition are so crude. A child could do better.' He began to poke at a keyboard. 'How does it all work?'

Over and over, on every screen, a merry old man with a thick white beard and a bright red tunic and hat, was riding through the sky on a wheel-less cart drawn by deer with antlers. 'Who is this? He's everywhere. I thought it was Jupiter.

Or Silenus. But that can't be right. Where are the wine and the bacchants and satyrs?'

She smiled. 'That's Father Christmas.'

`Father Who? What's he got to do with Christmas?' He glanced round at the people, young and old, clutching their purchases. He fumbled for his notebook and pencil. And then the music started. A choir singing in a cloying new harmony that he clearly could not fathom. But he heard the words.

`Gloria in Excelsis *Deo.'*

He clutched Susan's arm again. A sudden cold horror in his voice.

'**This is a church.** Oh, Heaven! I didn't see it. This is what it has become...'

She tried gently to extricate herself. 'Leonardo, it's all right.'

`Hosanna in the Highest.'

`No. No, it's not. Those are carols to mark the holy day of Christmas. To **celebrate the** great mystery of God's gift. But you've filled his temple with merchants and moneylenders!'

Ìt's not my world,' Susan protested.

Ìt's desecrated and defiled! Out with it all!' He seized hold of one of the computer screens and tried to throw it. It shifted only inches on its security chain.

Alarms sounded, drowning the carol. 'God forgive us! It's blasphemy! **I** cannot endure this terrible place!'

117

11111111

Susan grabbed at him, but was left clutching only his cloak. Leonardo was away.

He ducked past an advancing assistant and went scrambling down the moving stairway, knocking shoppers out of his path. She had no chance of catching him.

By the time she reached ground level, he was gone. She couldn't see him for the sea of people. 'Oh, Grandfather,' she called aloud. 'What am I going to do?'

A loud ding-dong merrily answered her prayer from on high. The voice of an angel with an estuary accent: 'Would Miss Susan and Mr da Vinci please come to the customer services desk on the ground floor where their grandfather is waiting for them. Thank you.'

London's dusky light was slipping into a real twilight. Above the orange streetlamps, the sky had sunk into an ominous grey-mauve torpor. Leonardo kept walking, one foot in front of another to stop himself falling headlong. His clothes damp with drizzle, his hair straggling. The crowds jostled him. The lamps on the fronts of the car-chariots dazzled him. He was defenceless against the battery of

sounds, sights and smells that he longed to cut out, but lusted to take on too.

The city was a giant engine, grinding into his head. Endless chains of snarling glow-eyed traffic worked it. Who knew what it did? Or what it worked for? It was a parody of his own world. It devoured the true light and created its own living and Godless hell. It was choking him. He was lost and he did not know the way back.

He gasped for air and missed his footing. Never try to do two things at once, he thought as he sprawled sideways.

No one stopped or lifted him up. Humanity laden with parcels skirted him as if he was riddled with plague. He stayed flattened against the solid steadiness of the wet pavement, listening to the city's dark heartbeat. If he cut it open with his knife, would he still find the light of the world? Where were Susan and the Doctor? And where was he? Where should he be? Vinci? Florence? Anywhere but *here. Leonardo* di Niente. Leonardo of Nothing.

Finally he lifted his head and saw the proclamation in the unnatural light. A warrant pasted to a wall: 'The History of Art. From the Renaissance to Warhol. All at the National Gallery.' And he knew the painting beneath the script. A virgin and child. The Virgin and Child that was propped against the wall in Sandro Botticelli's workshop in Florence. Leonardo had held the painting in his hands, admiring its skill with colour and the tenderness of the figures. He and Sandro had toasted the finished work in rough local wine. It was only a matter of days ago. Days that were centuries ago.

The National Gallery, he thought. What is that?

Ìf there is a Mr da Vinci in the store, would he please come immediately to the customer services desk on the ground floor.'

'He isn't in the store,' muttered Susan. 'He could be anywhere by now. He could get hurt.'

The Doctor smiled lamely at the punk angel with the estuary accent, who was eyeing them across her desk with very un-angelic disdain. 'This is what you get when you try to help people,' he hissed. The angel had a safety pin through her left

nostril. 'We should have left him at home in his own century. Most

concerning.

Filling that notebook with all sorts of doo-dahs. Heaven knows what trouble he could cause.'

`Grandfather. You could say the same about us.'

He looked almost insulted. 'What nonsense. We always behave with complete responsibility. Leonardo has no idea what he's doing. He's out of his depth. And out of his time. We must find him.' He glanced again at the angel with black fingernails.

`That's Leonardo da Vinci, is it?' she said flatly.

Ìndeed.'

`Yeah, right.' She smirked. 'And I'm the Mona Lisa.'

The Doctor studied her for a moment. `La Giaconda? Surely not...'

Ìt's a joke, Grandfather,' Susan advised.

Ànaconda, more like.'

The un-angelic Lisa snapped on her microphone. 'Leonardo da Vinci will shortly be signing copies of his pictures in the art-and-posters department. Thank you.'

`Disgraceful,' the Doctor protested. 'And inaccurate too. Leonardo never signed any of his works.'

`Never signs,' corrected Susan.

`Then now's his chance.' The angel smiled. 'It's Christmas. Have a mince pie.'

The Doctor ignored the proffered plate. He picked up a leaflet from a selection on the desk and studied them intensely for a moment. 'Susan, go back to the TARDIS...' he said urgently.

`What? Now?'

`Quick as you can. Before that wretched jobsworth park keeper closes the gates.'

`But what about you?'

Ì have something to do. Leonardo could do serious damage to the flow of Time.'

Òr to himself,' she ventured.

`Yes, yes. That as well.' He helped himself to the indignant angel's ballpoint and scribbled figures on the back of the leaflet. 'Now, I re-tuned the scanner and left the children and their mother watching some cartoon channel or other. The range of television is amazing these days. Most of it rubbish...'

Ànd?'

He looked at her sternly. 'Susan, since it's Christmas, I think for once you can pilot the ship on your own.'

`Yes, Grandfather,' she said indulgently, trying to decipher his writing.

Ànd mind you enter these coordinates properly, hmm? We don't want you and that donkey landing up in Kathmandu or Mars North or the twenty-third century.'

`No, Grandfather.' She turned over the leaflet. It was advertising 'The History of Art'. Òh, no. You don't think...'

`Go on, goon,' urged the Doctor. 'I'll meet you in Trafalgar Square. Right by **the National Gallery.' And he filched himself a mince pie for his journey. 'As long as I' m not** too late.'

* * *

119

'Ladies and gentlemen, the National Gallery will be closing in 15 minutes. Please make your way to the exits.'

'What do I see? I, Leonardo di Niente, see images and styles of paintings I do not understand. I go from room to room seeing painted figures and faces, royalty and peasants, who have lived *long* after my time. And now they are long dead too. The whole future of my art opens before me and it is already in the past. What have I missed? What wars and battles? Why am I permitted to see such things? Paintings are the deathless children that survive the people who made them. Living on in this new and dark age.

'Who are these artists? I cannot take them all in. Who are Georges

Seurat and Claude Monet and Joseph Turner? Their languages are different. They transcend reality with colour and shape to create new truths and impressions of truths. I'm not sure if I understand them or even like them. When was a sky ever that colour?

Whoever wore a hat like that one? I think I wish I'd thought of that.

'And here is Sandro Botticelli. My friend on many a drunken night. Here are his works, some created after I was gone from Florence. *Mars* and Venus — Venus triumphant and wanton, and Mars just plain exhausted as teasing fauns steal away his weapons. And here it is: that *Virgin* and Child that I once held in the sunlit workshop. It is darkened by the years. Some of its bloom is lost to the centuries, but its skill and tenderness are preserved for the ages, stored in egg and oils.

'And beside it a label, like a plaque in a family tomb: "Sandro Botticelli (1444-151o)."

'I just want to touch the painting again.'

And he reached for it.

'Don't touch please, sir.'

Leonardo turned and stared at the cold-eyed steward, unable to speak.

'Do... you... understand... English?' said the guard loudly and slowly.

Leonardo thought to say that these days he spoke in many tongues. You wouldn't believe how many. But all he could muster was 'Leonardo...' yet he smiled with his best good grace that always charmed the ladies and many a youth as well.

The steward studied him and his sodden clothes for a moment. 'Room two,' he said with a veiled smile and pointed. 'But the gallery is closing soon. You only have a few minutes.'

Room after room. The Doctor ignored the dead whose pictures adorned the walls.

He was searching among the living. Time was thinning out like the crowds in the gallery. Early closing for Christmas Eve.

'Young man, I am looking for Leonardo.'

'I' m afraid the gallery is closing, sir.'

'I have to find him.'

The steward sighed. 'Room two, sir. That way. But you only *have...'*

'That will be quite sufficient,' called the Doctor from halfway out of the room.

* * *

120

Leonardo was stock still. The painting ofThe Virgin of the Rocks hung before him on the wall. Sublime figures, mother, child, saint and angel, ethereal yet solid, godlike yet rich in humanity, all lit by an unearthly radiance.

The Doctor approached slowly, aware of the scrutiny of another steward. 'You see? You did finish this one,' he said gently.

`Finished it?' Leonardo intoned, his voice drained of energy. 'I don't even recall starting it.' Tears streaked his face. 'There is a better version on display in Paris.

Or so it says.' He was trembling, not actually looking at the painting at all, but staring at the descriptive label beside the frame.

'I' m too late, aren't I?' said the Doctor. 'I am truly sorry.'

Leonardo gave the slightest nod. 'It frightens me. Finding out I'm mortal.'

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519).

`We are closing now, sir,' said the steward.

The Doctor draped Leonardo's cloak around the young man's shoulders and led him out of the gallery.

There was a crowd in Trafalgar Square, gathered expectantly at the foot of Nelson's Column. The drizzle had stopped and a brass band was playing. It was a fine night after all. Beside the traditional giant Christmas tree with its firmament ofwhite light bulbs, there was a smaller tree, festooned with tinsel and parcels and coloured fairy lights. It was crowned by a flashing white star. The donkey was there, behaving itself at last, dutifully carrying three ragged little children round and round the square and fountains.

The Doctor saw Susan and waved as she approached.

`Leonardo, thank goodness.' She took his hand. 'Thank goodness, you're all right. I was so scared for you.' But he only managed a half-hearted smile.

`Well,' said the Doctor cheerfully, 'quite a change from last time we were in Trafalgar Square.'

Susan gasped. 'Oh, yes. When we brought the Thaleks and there was all that fuss...'

Ànd all they wanted to do was feed the pigeons!'

But Leonardo hardly seemed interested. The Doctor caught Susan's quizzical glance and shook his head. 'Maybe it's time we were going. We'd better round up the children.'

At that moment, the band began to play again and the crowd, under the guidance of an enthusiastic conductor, began to sing.

Unto us is born a Boy,

King of all Creation:

Cradled in a stall *was He,*

The Lord of *every* nation,

The Lord of *every* nation.

Leonardo stood and listened. The Doctor, noticing the notebook protruding from his tunic pocket, edged closer.

'Doctor, Susan,' Leonardo said solemnly, 'I must speak with you.' He sat them down on the steps as the singing played round them, vaulting up into the night sky. And the notebook, which had been so teasingly close, seemed to have slipped out of reach again.

'I do not understand who you are,' he continued, tut you have been kind. You have shown me many things. And I have asked for much. But when I begged for something, you did not question why. You simply carried me there and left me to find my faith.'

'And we have faith in you,' said the Doctor and his eyes twinkled like

stars in the east. 'Perhaps now you understand a little of your own importance.'

'I cannot tell.' Leonardo bunched back his straggled hair. 'Who am I? A name on a gallery wall? Once my works were only seen by the rich or pious, now they are *there* for all the world. That's good, isn't it? Some things endure, others fail.

Paintings, ideas, faith. It seems to me like a throw of the dice.'

`There's good and bad belief, Leonardo. Don't forget that the town was full of soldiers on the Tetrarch's darkest business. The Massacre of the Innocents. Quite monstrous. Yet things still survive against all odds. Never mind art and faith, look at me! And at least a few poor souls who found refuge in my TARDIS.'

Herod then with dread was filled:

A prince,' he said, in *Jewry!'*

All the little boys he killed

At Bethl'em in his fury ,

At Bethl'em in his fury.

`Well, we couldn't let that happen, now could we, hmm?'

Leonardo blew his nose on his cloak. 'That was the right thing to do, Doctor.

I' m glad you did it. Sometimes history should be denied its bloody course.'

'You see.' The Doctor smiled. 'The saving of a few lives hasn't upset the world at all.'

Ànd what about me? Am I saved too?'

Àh, well, Leonardo, you still have so much to do. As, I'm afraid, you are already aware.'

The young man listened to the swell of the carols. `No matter, Doctor. It was a shock. It always will be. But there's no harm done. Pretend I've forgotten already.'

He stood as he saw Susan approaching. He hadn't even noticed that

she had gone, but she was now followed by the little group of *rescued* children and their mother She was carrying a plate loaded with food bars.

'Look,' she called, 'the food machine got something right at last! Mince pies!'

The Doctor eyed the solid squares of nutrient with suspicion, but one bite was enough to convince him otherwise. 'Extraordinary Fruit and crisp pastry. And do I detect a dash of brandy? Whatever next?'

`Merry Christmas, Doctor,' called Leonardo. 'And thank you!'

`No, no. Thank you, Leonardo.' And the Doctor raised his food bar in a toast.

Mrs Simeon and the children cheered. The donkey heehawed. And a giant 122

electronic screen in the square blazed into life as Prime Minister Harold Macmillan wished all the revellers across the nation a happy holiday. They'd never, ever had it so good!

In the sort of unnoticed moment that only Time Lords can manage, the Doctor pulled Susan aside. 'I couldn't reach it. That wretched notebook!'

She smiled. 'But I did.'

`Susan? You? Well, where is it? What's in it?'

`He's going to be very upset.' She nodded towards the donkey. It was still chewing contentedly.

The Doctor stared in disbelief. And then he started to chuckle. 'Oh, dear.' And he gave her a hug. 'What a terrible loss to posterity. Quite, quite deplorable.' He shook his head in disapproval as he scratched the splendidly guilty beast between the ears.

Èxcellent!' The Doctor, filled at last with festive bonhomie, slapped Leonardo on the back. 'You see? The future's safe and sound, and 1961 is just the same as it always will be! Now then, my boy, where else would you like to go, hmm?'

Comforts of Home

Pete Kempshall

An Adventure of the Fifth Doctor,

with Vizior *Turlough*

23 December 1861

Charlotte's hair shone in the moonlight. It was no natural lustre — fragments of glass had rained on to her head when the window shattered. She picked a shred of paper from her tongue and strained to listen for movement outside. Now that the firing had stopped, however, the silence was absolute.

Slowly, she raised first her gun, then her head, above the level of the sill. It looked like the soldiers had retreated, leaving the two dead bodies in the yard where they had fallen. Charlotte aimed at a smear of grey beside a tree trunk; the 1 shot boomed into the darkness and her target vanished. She was quite unable to tell if she had actually hit him or not.

Ripping open another cartridge with her teeth, she held the metal ball in her mouth, keeping her hands free to pour the powder into the gun barrel. Not so long ago she had been revolted by the bitter, leaden taste of the shot. Now it was almost comforting. When Samuel had first suggested Charlotte learn to load and fire a I, weapon, she had been scandalised. Firearms were in no way the province of a respectable young woman. But her husband had insisted. With the Potomac mere miles away and the Union front line mustered on the far side of it, he had known there was every chance that the war would be fought literally in their front yard.

I • Samuel was a practical man, determined that she should be able to defend herself.

He had been right, of course. Just three days previously, up the road at Dranesville, North and South had fought for most of the afternoon over Confederate supply wagons. Charlotte had heard the shots as clearly as if they'd been in the next field. Even then, she hadn't been worried. There was still her father to protect her since Samuel had signed up.

She glanced again at her father's body, sprawled face up in the dirt in front of the house. It was strange but she felt nothing, no emotion at all.

Without even having to think about it, she spat the bullet into the barrel of the gun and reached for the ramrod to drive it home.

Private Lucius Casler was losing his men. It hadn't taken much to persuade them to desert after the battle at Dranesville, of course. All he'd had to promise was nice, easy pickings from a local estate. Casler was happy for them to loot to their hearts'

content, just so long as he got what he wanted himself. The moment the shooting had started, however, Odell had bolted into the night and the only thing keeping the others from doing the same was fear of Casler's reprisals.

At first, everything had gone to plan. William Watkins had welcomed Casler and his men with open arms. As a loyal Virginian, why wouldn't he? Casler's story had been credible. He was leading a foraging party, seeking supplies for the 125

Confederate army, he had said. With night drawing in, he would appreciate Mr Watkins allowing his men to escape the cold for the night in his barn.

Watkins had agreed readily and turned to wave reassuringly at his daughter, stood nervously on the porch. She would be so relieved, Watkins had explained.

They had few visitors, and every time a stranger came near, his daughter was terrified it meant bad news about her husband. He was serving with General Stuart down in Centreville, perhaps Casler knew him... Samuel Elkins?

Casler had shaken his head solemnly. No, sir, he knew of no Mr Elkins, he had lied. He and his men just needed a place to stay. Miss Charlotte need fear no grave tidings from him.

As soon as the words had passed his lips, Casler had known the jig was up.

Watkins had never mentioned his daughter's name.

He might still have talked his way into the house, had it not been for Earl Baker.

Baker was a vicious so-and-so and never needed much of an excuse to start a fight.

The moment suspicion had dawned in his eyes, Watkins was a dead man. Baker had calmly raised his rifle and shot the old fella before Casler could move to stop him.

Being on the porch, the pretty little blonde had an uninterrupted view of the whole thing. She must have had a rifle loaded and ready to fire just inside the door too — the first they had known of it was when Baker's corpse was toppling over to lie beside Watkins.

Now Casler and his boys were freezing half to death out in the woods while that woman stayed safe inside, taking pot shots at them. The men would desert him if he didn't come up with a plan to save the situation, and quickly. They owed him far less than they owed General Stuart.

He reached into the pouch at his waist, retrieving a cartridge packet and percussion cap. As he reloaded, he looked to his right where Pullman shivered, breath issuing from his lungs like smoke.

`What?' Pullman snapped.

Òn your feet,' Casler ordered. 'Get the men over here.' He smiled coldly. 'We're not done with that woman yet.'

Charlotte crept to the rear of the building, keeping low. She should keep watch on the soldiers at the front of the house, but it was only a matter of time before some of them circled the building and tried to get in through the back. She had to be ready.

Reaching the kitchen, she began to heave the heavy table towards the door. A barricade ought to delay the soldiers long enough for her to kill one or two of them. She had only counted eight when they had first arrived, and one was already dead. So long as she kept herself in the house and the pillagers out, she had a slim chance.

She was still sliding the table across the floor when she saw him. Dressed all in black, he would have been hard to distinguish from the darkness had it not been for the paleness of his skin. He emerged from the trees at the rear of the house and was crossing the open ground to the back door, bold as could be. Charlotte 126

reached for her rifle; killing the soldiers' scout would deter an attack more effectively than a table against the door.

Charlotte waited as the man edged closer, close enough for her to see the glittering of his eyes. They shone beneath fierce brows, slanting evilly in towards the bridge of his nose. Now that he was nearer to the house, Charlotte could see he was little more than a youth, but there was something predatory and dangerous about the way he moved, as if his nature were as black as his clothes.

The ball took the young man low, ripping into his leg, and he tumbled over into the dirt with a yelp that was more boy than man. Charlotte was already reloading, lest the boy had companions close by. Sure enough, a tall man was sprinting towards the wounded scout, dropping into a crouch beside him.

`Don't shoot!' he shouted as he fussed over the wound. 'We mean you no harm!'

Without waiting for a response, the man tore open the leg of his comrade's pants and began using the material to bind the wound. He was close in age to Samuel, with sandy hair cut above the collar and dressed in lightly hued clothes of **a** fashion entirely new to Charlotte. Perhaps he'd come from the city. Maybe even Richmond. Black smears marred his outfit, as if he had been standing too close to **a** fire and been tarnished by smoke. A ragged green flower — or was that a vegetable? — drooped from the lapel of his overcoat, but by far the most striking thing about him was the sticky, black stain Charlotte could see on the woollen garment beneath. The sheer quantity of blood that saturated the clothes suggested **a** mortal wound. The man's very mobility, however, proclaimed that it was not a wound he had received himself.

Tying off the makeshift bandage, the man raised his eyes to the house and called out. 'You must listen to me, Mrs Elkins. You must leave here now. You're in the gravest of danger.'

Ànd who might you be, sir, to present me with such an order?' Charlotte maintained a careful aim at the interloper's chest.

Ì' m the Doctor. This boy you've shot is my friend, Turlough. Your husband sent **us.'**

`Samuel? Where is he?'

`Please, Charlotte, you must leave with us immediately. It isn't safe for you to remain here.'

The Doctor's face showed no sign of guile, a stark contrast to the satanic mien **of** his fallen comrade. Yet the soldiers who had killed her father had known Charlotte's name — if they had known that, it made good sense that they would know of Samuel too. They would know that if Samuel told her it was too dangerous to remain in the house, she would leave.

And once out in the open she would be an easy target.

À fine attempt, sir, but I assure you I will be quite safe here out of the sight of **your** friends' rifles. I suggest you take your companion and inform your leader that **while** my father may have been trusting enough to fall for his ruses, I shall not be **fooled** so easily.'

The Doctor stood, arms out, pleading. 'Charlotte, you must listen to **me!**'

'Go!' Charlotte cried, brandishing her rifle.

127

The Doctor stared at the window, frustration and helplessness plain on his face.

He gently helped Turlough to his feet. Charlotte watched the pair hobble from view, then resumed hefting the table across the kitchen.

`Leave her, Doctor.' Turlough's breath hissed through his teeth as his injured leg took his weight. He'd hoped for a little more assistance getting back to the TARDIS but the Doctor had declared his injury a mere flesh wound and immediately lost all interest in his role as human crutch. 'She can look after herself.'

Ì can't leave her, Turlough,' replied the Doctor, pacing angrily, his hands thrust deep into his trouser pockets. 'I promised Samuel I'd protect her.'

And at the time it had seemed like an easy promise to keep. They hadn't even had to evade any soldiers to get close to the house — the man guarding the rear had fled in terror at the bellowing roar of the TARDIS materialising. If only the damsel in distress had been as cooperative.

`You're wasting your time,' Turlough stressed. 'She won't listen, you know.'

The Doctor stopped pacing, an infuriating, sly smile on his face. 'Not to me she won't, no.'

Casler stood back as his fellows took the strain on the cart, his eyes on the small square of card in his hands. The men had been only too pleased when he had suggested they slip out of the woods and into the warmth of the barn, and it was with reluctance that they now ventured out into the freezing night air, bumping the cart in front of them. Tilted backwards so that its underside faced *the* house, the

wagon would provide ample and mobile cover for the soldiers to reach the building. He had already sent his most trusted man to the rear of the house to stop the woman escaping that way. He'd have liked to have sent more than just the one, but most of his comrades would fly like unwatched slaves if he let them out of his sight. That was the trouble with deserters: you couldn't rely on them to stay where you put them.

They'd be even less likely to remain if they knew what Casler was planning for when they got close to the building.

He slipped the card into his tunic, took a deep breath and stepped outside to join the others. Despite the bitter chill in the air, he paused at a nearby horse trough to splash his face with icy water. He would need a clear head if he was going to keep control of the situation.

Not long to wait now, he told himself. Not long at all.

Charlotte fired three shots at the cart as it rattled into view. None of them had even the smallest effect on its progress. She bided her time, waiting for the men hidden in its shadow to emerge. When they continued to keep low, she realised that she was essentially defenceless.

A pinpoint glow of orange had appeared in the dark, gradually spreading into fiercer brightness. They had set the cart alight. They were going to roll it into the house and burn her out.

Or burn her alive.

Fear rendered her immobile. The soldiers at the front of the house had support from that doctor at the rear. If she ran, they would be on her the instant she left the house. But if she stayed...

`Charlotte.'

She turned. The Doctor stood in the doorway, hands clasped in front of him.

Charlotte noticed he was wringing them in pent-up tension. 'How did you get in here?' she demanded.

`Please come with us,' he said. 'We're here to help, I assure you.'

`You assure me?' Charlotte's eyes flicked down to where she had left her rifle, abandoned after her last, desperate shot. 'How can you do that, sir? How can I trust you?'

The Doctor looked from Charlotte's face to a point over her left shoulder. 'I'm not asking you to.'

Turning just enough to see, without presenting her back to the intruder, Charlotte followed the Doctor's gaze to the window.

The fire that lit up her eyes had little to do with the flames from the cart.

1 'What the hell are you doing?' Pullman spluttered as the cart began to blaze.

`We're going to push it into the house,' Casler whispered. 'Smoke her out.'

Pullman stepped towards Casler, pushing him in the chest. 'You set fire to the house, you'll set fire to our loot! You said there was money here! You promised us!'

Ì didn't come here to argue.' Casler drew his revolver — pickings of his own from the battle three days before — and shot Pullman dead. The three remaining men stood rooted to the spot, gaping at him. 'Now listen to me. There is no wealth to be had in there. None you cowards could use, anyhow. I mean to burn that house to the ground and you're going to help me. So push the damn cart, or does anyone else want to complain"

`Mayhap I do.'

Casler spun, eyes wide. Dimly, he was aware of his remaining companions scattering in fear, their rifles and dignity abandoned. 'You. You shouldn't be here.'

Samuel Elkins raised the point of his sword to within inches of Casler's throat.

'It is you who should not be here, Private Casler. I intend to put that right.'

Snarling, Casler brought his revolver up, only to have it swatted from his hand with the flat of Elkins's blade. Clutching his stinging knuckles, Casler stumbled backwards, his foot turning under him. As

he reached out to arrest his fall, his arm **plunged** into the blazing cart. The sleeve burst into flame. He flailed at the fire **with** his other hand, howling and beating at the burning fabric, but his desperate attempts to extinguish the blaze led only to the other sleeve catching light. The memory oficy water on his face drove Casler in the direction of the barn but he was still some distance from the horse trough as the flames spread to the front of his **tunic.** His screams continued to pierce the night until the heat finally reached the **cartridge** box on his belt and cut them off with a single, concussive note.

Turlough thought that Samuel's ribs would break if Charlotte didn't ease off the 1 29

hugging soon. When the woman had seen her husband walking towards the house she had gathered up her skirts and sprinted to meet him — he had been pinned ever since. Still, a spell in the TARDIS sickbay had all but healed Turlough's leg; a few cracked ribs shouldn't give it any problems.

`We should take him back now,' Turlough suggested to the Doctor, who had positioned himself on the porch deep in thought, hands clasped behind his back.

`Before anyone notices he's in two places at once.'

The Doctor stared at the flaming remains of the cart. 'Did you know that many of the soldiers who first signed up to fight in this war only did so for three months?

They truly believed it would all be over long before now.' He turned to Turlough, face grave. 'Samuel told me he had promised Charlotte he would be with her for Christmas. Humans can't conceive of anything keeping them apart at this time of year, you see?' He sighed. 'They're hardly ever right.'

`You're going to let him stay, aren't you?'

`Just for tonight. It's a little early for Christmas itself, but I don't imagine they'll complain too strongly.'

Ànd what about all that stuff you keep telling me about the laws of time and how we mustn't interfere?' Turlough asked. He knew the Doctor had already made up his mind.

`The damage was already done the moment I took Samuel out of his

timeline.

An extra few hours won't make any difference. Besides, I think they've both earned it, don't you?' Turlough raised an eyebrow sceptically and the Doctor broke into a broad grin. 'Well, I think that's all settled, then.'

Samuel, the Doctor and Turlough departed the next morning, having first placed William Watkins and the three dead soldiers in the barn. The Doctor reassured Charlotte that he would arrange for their collection by the local undertaker.

The shock had passed. Charlotte felt she would have been inconsolable at the death of her father, had it not been for Samuel's presence. As he had said, the events of the previous evening proved that she was so much more than the little woman pining away at home for her husband. His words, his faith in her, had hardened her immeasurably. But she still needed Samuel beside her to shore *her* up against the grief. His presence was surely the best Christmas gift she had ever received.

Three hours after her husband and his friends left, the undertaker's wagon arrived from Dranesville. The appearance of anyone from the world beyond her front yard would normally have seized Charlotte with dread, but she found herself walking out to meet the wagon, waving as she went. If she noticed that while the undertaker had four bodies to collect, he had brought just the one coffin, she attached the error no significance...

Casler kept running until he had reached the cover of the cornfield. All around, Confederates and Yankees were killing each other, but he was sure he was the only true murderer among them. Let the soldiers wade in blood for control of supply wagons — he had killed for something far more valuable.

Daring a look back, he saw that a tall man in expensive-looking, lightly coloured clothes had emerged from the smoke of battle and was crouched beside Elkins. He had lifted the fallen officer's head and shoulders from the dirt and was cradling them in his lap, heedless of the blood that soaked into his clothes. Elkins's lips were moving and the stranger lowered his head to Samuel's face, the better to hear him.

Casler stepped back involuntarily as the blond man's head snapped round towards him. Elkins's would-be saviour, now confessor, could

not possibly have seen Casler, not with the cornstalks affording him cover, but just for a second it felt as if the stranger's eyes were looking directly into his own. In an instant, the contact was broken, the man's attention returning to Elkins.

Keeping low, Casler skirted the battle and made away. He was done with this war now. No, no more fighting for Lucius Casler. Hell, there were only five days to Christmas, and he was damned if he was going to spend the holiday getting shot at. Smiling to himself, he took one last look at the photograph of the woman, its edges sticky with Elkins's blood, then stuffed it into his tunic. Five days.

Time enough to go get himself a gift.

131

Christmas on the Moon

Simon Guerrier

An Adventure of the Sixth Doctor,

with Evelyn Smythe

14 December 1972

Dust ripples and eddies underneath you as you glide down the bank of the Taurus Littrow valley, chasing the tracks left behind by your prey. You're hungry. Ahead, out across the dark mantle strewn with hummocky craters, there's a pinprick that might just be them. You press on, unhindered by air or atmosphere. It's desperately gleeful, this feeling.

The tracks weave easily between the larger rocks, and you follow, bent close to the ground, swirling dust with your breath. It clouds your senses, every particle vivid with ancient memory. It would be easy to get lost in it all, but you can't be distracted. Not now you've seen the tracks. Not now there's someone here.

You've seen evidence of them before, of course — broken and discarded relics of their brief forays into your territory. This is the first time you've picked up their trail while still warm. This time, you're going to catch them.

The valley floor is mostly flat, though the slight incline will have slowed them a little, giving you the advantage. And out there in front

of you...

You see them.

The glint of sunlight on metal surfaces, and you know you've found their nest.

The metal creature squats on its splayed legs, as if warming a metal egg. Its shape... it's not what you'd expected from the tracks. It's bigger. Much bigger.

You're wary now. You'd thought —

Well, you'd thought lots of things. Your mind has been racing since you picked up the tracks. All kinds of possibilities in them. Parallel worm tracks, folding under and over each other where the path has turned. A vehicle, you realise.

Wheels.

You wait. You can't be sure the metal creature hasn't seen you.

Time passes. You're used to that. You could read the dust around you, place its history and the distance it has come to be here, the great age it has spent unmoving on this barren moon. You've always had a lot in common with this dust.

The metal creature is humming to itself now. You can't hear it, of course, but you can feel the sensation in the ground underneath you. It might have seen you, this might be a warning to keep away.

But, no, it's more like it's preparing for something. The ground trembles ever more insistently.

Oh.

You realise what the metal creature is. It's not a creature at all.

You venture forward. Yes, the oily, industrial stink is there now you're looking for it. Yes, footprints are strewn around the tracks you've been following. Tiny, 13 3

meek footprints like those you've seen everywhere across space. You know the sorts of creature they belong to. Ones who travel between the stars by cramming themselves into small metal boxes.

Like the one powering up right in front of you.

You shout, but there's no way they can hear you. Moondust swirls as you charge forward, but the men won't be looking your way. They'll be looking upwards, their delicate, tender bodies tied tight into their seats.

You roar with frustration, reaching out for them, the painted letters 'Apollo 17'

almost in your grasp...

And pop!

The top half of the creature bursts up into the starless black sky. You grab hold of the leggy base left behind. You roar with the misery and anguish of it. And make no sound at all.

You watch them glide eerily upwards into the darkness. You're furious. You could have stopped them.

Angry, defeated, kicking their squat, heavy car as you pass, you head back across the valley, to the mountains. Back to the shadow that has been your home for so long. They'll be back, you tell yourself. They've been bolder each time they've been here. There'll be another time. You will feed again.

You will just have to be patient.

Years, and ten days, later

Anyone else who had ever been on the Moon had died years ago.

The thought struck Varani as she stared out of the porthole across the barren lunar surface. She had never been able to sleep on Christmas Eve. And though her colleagues, Jackson and Gire, teased her for hanging up a stocking, it felt right to celebrate Christmas up here. It was nothing like home, of course — no noise, no family, none of the marathon cooking. But through the window, the Moon lay grey and quiet, **tranquil.** Like a white Christmas.

They'd all been spooked by the horizon when they first arrived at the moonbase.

It was a strange, magical landscape, the great mountains in the distance too much in focus without any atmosphere to blur them. It just didn't seem real. Jackson joked that maybe the nuts were right, and they really were all locked up in some warehouse down the road

from Canaveral. It was much more likely than the alternative, wasn't it?

Jackson rarely joked. That was why he'd got to her.

Either way, whether they were victims of some vast, elaborate hoax, or hundreds of thousands of miles from the Earth, Varani felt small, and vulnerable, like a child again. The perfect feeling for this time of year. She pressed her face against the porthole, taking in the wonder of it all. The cabin was silent but for the tick of the life-support systems. And outside, of course, there could be no noise.

Clink!

Varani froze. The sound had come from... she looked quickly back, but Jackson and Gire were asleep in their hammocks. The noise came from the other side of the base.

She crept forward, heart hammering. But nothing. Maybe she'd imagined it.

Clink!

It was a purposeful noise, deliberate. She knew all the sounds the base ever made, and this wasn't one of them. It never clinked. Not like that.

Clink!

She tapped Jackson on the arm. He woke, saying nothing, alert. Their watch pattern had always been sacred. He knew she wouldn't disturb him lightly.

`There's a noise,' she said. He nodded.

Agonising seconds passed as they listened. Nothing. Jackson kept listening, making it Varani's call.

Ì —' she began.

Clink!

`The airlock,' he said. He was right.

Clink! Clink!

No denying it now. Jackson slipped from his hammock, bare feet padding down on the smooth floor. For a moment she thought he'd wake Gire, but he reconsidered. Let her sleep, Varani concurred without speaking. If it was bad, she'd soon know about it.

Varani followed as Jackson moved carefully, slowly around the sleeping area and into the corridor that connected the small cabins. They squeezed by the equipment and stores, and came to the wide area kept clear for suiting up. Pink lighting marked out the airlock. The ever-lit medical bay was right next to it, ready in case of injuries outside.

`What's that?' Jackson whispered, pointing up at the large window beside the airlock. Varani didn't see it at first, and then didn't see its importance. Away in the distance, a fog of moondust swirled up by the wind.

Only there wasn't any wind on the Moon.

CLINK!

The sound again, loud and insistent. It had to be the airlock. Something trying to get in.

Jackson was already getting his spacesuit on, efficiently slipping his bare legs into the trousers. He didn't look worried, thought Varani. Just getting on with the job in hand. She looked back at the dust storm outside. Was it getting closer? Was that possible?

CLINK! CLINK!

Jackson dipped under the top half of his suit, and stood up into it. Varani hurried over, helping him with the clips and safety checks. She hadn't yet acknowledged what he was about to do. Whatever was happening outside, Jackson was going to walk out into it.

She gave him a thumbs up, to tell him his air was flowing, that he was ready. He nodded his gold-plated face in acknowledgement. She was glad she couldn't see his eyes, or what he was thinking.

CLINK! CLINK! CLINK!

The noise was more desperate now. Jackson picked up the stocky bore-pole, holding it out in front of him like a weapon. His hand hesitated at the panel for the 135

airlock. He turned, and for a moment Varani thought he was taking one last look at her. But no, she saw it in the reflection of his visor: he was looking over her shoulder at the great porthole window.

She turned too. The dust storm seethed, almost on top of them. It didn't seem possible that it could still remain utterly silent.

CLINK! CLINK CLINK! CLANK!

The noise was frantic outside the airlock, and now there was whispering all round them. Moon dust battered against the base, scratching at the portholes, scouring the metal walls. The base clattered and rattled in protest.

`WHAT THE HELL?' Gire must have been woken by the cacophony.

Jackson stepped quickly back from the airlock, brandishing the pole in front of him. The airlock hummed. Something had got into it! Jackson stepped forward again, smacking the controls to keep the door shut. Behind them, the partition between the cabins sealed shut, and abruptly cut off Gire's furious swearing.

Varani couldn't move, couldn't take her eyes off whatever it was coming in. She didn't have a suit on; there was no time to get one. If the airlock was breached, she was dead.

The base continued to rock and rumble as the dust storm swept over it.

CLICK! CLICK!

Ping!

The lights winked around the airlock and the door began to open. Moon dust curled around the door, a faint haze drifting into their safe haven. Jackson swatted at it with his pole, achieving nothing.

The dust was around Varani, but she couldn't get the words out. She wanted to scream but it clogged all her senses.

As her vision faded to black, she saw terrible shapes looming out of the airlock, grappling Jackson to the floor.

Ì think this says it's tea,' said a kindly, old voice. 'You should try to drink it if you can.'

Varani opened her eyes. She was lashed tightly into the medical

hammock, the lights bright on her aching eyeballs. She vaguely recalled kicking and fighting from her dreams.

The nice old lady peering at her over half-moon spectacles was waving a food-tube in her face. Varani raised her head, reaching greedily for the end of the tube with her mouth. It wasn't tea, it was orange juice. But anything to get rid of the arid, gritty taste of moon dust.

`How is she?' asked Gire from somewhere nearby. Varani mumbled something to say she was fine, while never letting go of the tube.

`She *seems* recovered,' said a man's voice, another stranger. Varani heard how he stressed the word 'seems', and her insides clenched. 'I think we can let her go free.'

Gire appeared over her head, not meeting her eye as she worked to undo the straps. She'd been worried, Varani realised, and didn't want it known. Free, Varani could hardly feel her arms. No pain, they were just heavy and dead to her. They'd 136

hurt soon enough, she figured. She cradled the tube of orange juice in her numb hands and drank, acutely aware that everyone in the room was watching her.

Varani stared back, trying to make her brain work. Her ears and nose felt full of dust, like when she'd been a child, at the beach, and sand had got everywhere. The skin under her clothes was raw and rough where the dust had got to it. And her senses were dull and confused.

The medical bay was a small space to get them all into. Gire and the old lady were sat either side of her hammock. Jackson was still wearing the trousers from his space suit, leaning against the bench on the far wall. And at her feet stood a big man — tall and wide and full of presence — in a great blue cape. His wild, blond curls were something out of another century, nothing like the military buzzcut the astronauts all lived with. His eyes were piercing. As he looked back at her, his mouth forming into a sly, knowing smile, Varani felt he might just have read her whole life story. He stroked the cat badge on the lapel of his cape.

`You're going to be just fine,' he told her.

`There now,' said the old lady, withdrawing the tube when Varani had sucked it dry. 'Much better.' The woman should never have been allowed into space, thought Varani. She'd never have beaten the medicals. And anyway, she was wearing a cardigan.

`Who...?' she started, her throat horribly raw. The old lady smiled.

`My name is Evelyn,' she said. 'And I'm sorry you had to suffer because of us.'

Ìt wasn't because of us,' said the man in the cape sternly. 'We had nothing to do with the storm.' He turned to Jackson, scowling at the back of the room. 'Quite the opposite, in fact. We came here because we thought you might need our assistance.'

`We were fine,' said Jackson. 'We would have been fine. You still haven't said who you are.'

Ì am known as the Doctor —' began the other man.

`Not your names!' Jackson snapped. 'What are you doing here? No one's meant to be on the Moon, no one.'

Èxcept yourselves, I presume?' This Doctor had a lofty way of talking, like a headmaster reprimanding pupils he was nevertheless fond of.

`That's right,' said Gire. 'One scheduled mission. Who are you working for?'

`We don't work for anybody!' said the Doctor, taken aback.

`We're freelance,' Evelyn added.

`*Freelance?'* exclaimed the Doctor and Jackson together. The Doctor coughed.

`Well, actually I suppose we are.'

`What are we going to do with them?' Gire was looking right at Jackson. Neither looked her way. Varani shuddered. Her colleagues were working on the emergency protocols, should one of them be compromised. She'd been cut out of the decision-making process.

Ì don't know,' said Jackson. 'We don't know anything about them. How did they get here? How come they're not even dressed for the lunar surface? I mean, how did they even survive out there?'

`We did try to explain,' began the Doctor, reaching for what looked like clear 137

sheets, lying discarded on the floor. They reminded Varani of something... Oh, yes, the cheap plastic hoods handed out at open air

concerts when it looked like there might be some rain. Surely that hadn't been these people's only protection outside?

`We have to report them,' said Gire. 'They're dangerous.'

`Were that the case,' said the Doctor, 'do you think reporting us is going to save you?'

`What do you mean?' asked Gire.

`Well,' said the Doctor, scratching absent-mindedly at the back of his neck,

`were we really intending you harm, what could your friends back on Earth do to stop us?'

There was a terrible silence.

Ànd do you mean us harm?' asked Jackson.

The Doctor grinned. 'No, of course not,' he said. Varani realised she was grinning too.

Jackson, however, was not persuaded. He lunged at the Doctor with the pole he'd been carrying before. The Doctor parried, but Jackson was quick, and cracked him hard on the collarbone with the pole. The Doctor gasped with pain and collapsed to his knees.

`Doctor!' wailed Evelyn.

The Doctor held up a hand, keeping her back. He wanted Jackson's attention on him, Varani saw.

`There was no need...' he said.

Ì want to know who you two are,' said Jackson, brandishing the pole again.

`Turn out your pockets.'

Àctually,' said the Doctor, 'that might take some time.'

Ì said —' Jackson snapped.

Àll right, all right,' said Evelyn. 'Just don't hit him again!'

Varani watched as the old lady jammed her hands into her cardigan

pockets and unearthed all sorts of oddments, which she duly heaped onto the hammock. Then she was rifling through her handbag, going through each section before sighing and just upending the thing. Varani inspected the pile of rubbish beside her, looking for anything incriminating. There were various old tissues, some elastic bands, a lipstick... a glasses case, some pens, an old paperback called Reform!...

and some money.

Varani picked up one of the dense, metal coins and inspected it.

`What's that?' asked the Doctor.

Ìt's my change from buying the champagne,' explained Evelyn. She suddenly looked horrified. 'Oh, Doctor, I'm sorry.'

Ìt's...' began Varani, not quite believing it herself.

`What is it?' asked Jackson.

Varani stared again at the Roman profiles on the coin. She had no idea who the faces belonged to. And as for the date underneath them...

`They're from the future,' she said.

`What?' spat Jackson. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

Ì assure you...' began the Doctor, but thought better of it as Jackson raised the pole again.

Ìt makes sense, though, doesn't it?' asked Varani. 'Look at them. Look at what they're wearing... look at what they wore outside.'

`So, why did they attack us?'

`We didn't —' began the Doctor.

`You did,' said Jackson. 'That dust storm was something to do with you, wasn't it?'

`We did come from the future,' pleaded Evelyn. 'We came to solve a mystery...

We were just going to watch you, not get involved. But we couldn't just sit back, not when we saw what was coming for you.'

Jackson glared round at her. And his expression changed. Varani looked round too. Sure enough, out of the porthole window, the dust storm was hurtling towards them once again.

You curl back, cursing how clumsy you've become for lack of practice over the years. Perhaps it's been too long, and you're now insensible from lack of sustenance. Hunger burns all through you, the desperate need hauling you back to life.

You can practically taste them. Their fears, their hopes, their whole lives.

You must have more.

The next thing Jackson knew, the Doctor was on his feet and had yanked the bore-pole out of his hands. Jackson made to grab it back, and found the curved blade at the tip of the pole circling just centimetres from his nose. He took a step back, surrendering his ground, but the Doctor jabbed the pole forward, pinning him up against the wall.

`Leave him be!' cried Gire from across the room.

`Some sort of manual drilling instrument,' mused the Doctor, never taking his eye from Jackson, never letting him doubt he was ready to dispatch him. Out of the porthole, he could see the dust storm seething ever nearer.

`We're looking for water...' Varani broke the silence, her voice raw and broken.

The Doctor nodded, as if filing the information away. 'Based on the surveys from what, two decades ago?' He shrugged. 'Useless against a dust cloud, though.'

And he stepped away and tossed the bore-pole back to Jackson.

`What else have we got?' said the Doctor, looking all round him. Jackson looked down at the pole in his hands. The man was right: useless. The storm was almost on them.

`What do you recommend?' Jackson found himself asking.

`Well,' said the Doctor. The moon dust was already scraping at the windows.

Metal creaked and struggled as the wind got up. The Doctor stood watching it, again as if committing the sight to memory. 'What defences have you got?' he asked. The astronauts looked to one another.

`Nothing,' said Jackson.

Òh,' said the Doctor airily. 'What have you got that we can use to shore things up? There's got to be something.'

Again the astronauts exchanged glances.

`Nothing,' said Jackson again.

'I see,' said the Doctor. He gazed out of the window at the roaring moon dust.

Ìt's fascinating...' he began.

And suddenly the storm had them. Pain and noise burst through them all in an instant. Jackson tumbled forward, though if he hit the floor he never felt it. He tried to wrap his arms around his head to fight whatever it was whirling through him but he couldn't find his arms and he was falling and there he was talking to Gire about how she'd never cope meeting his family and he was shrivelling away in the heat of it and —

'Stop!'

The word cutting through the gale and a vision of this man in his blue cloak in his blue box and inside there's somehow the sun and —

'I. Will. Not. Have. This!'

Snap.

Nothing. Quiet.

The floor was hard under Jackson's aching limbs.

Reeling.

Backward, upside down, without purchase on the soft surface of this moon.

The scream you can hear, tearing out across space, is your own. You struggle to gather in your wits.

That hurt. Whatever it was the thing did, that hurt. They're more than you thought them. More powerful, more resisting. More flavoursome.

You need to regroup, you need to recover. And then you'll take them.

Gire struggled to her feet, wiping the blood from her nose. The others were recovering too, the Doctor helping first Evelyn to her feet, then offering a hand to Jackson. The man didn't hesitate.

`What was that?' asked Gire.

Ìt was in my head!' said Varani.

Ìt's a creature composed of pure thought,' said the Doctor, dead calm. 'The dust storm is just its physical manifestation as it tries to get through to us.'

`You stopped it, though, didn't you?' asked Evelyn.

The Doctor smiled. 'Not for long,' he said. 'It wasn't expecting any resistance, and I could only give it a bit of a scare. We need to work on some kind of barricade before it comes back.'

`What can we possibly do against a thing like that?' said Jackson. Gire noted the fear in his voice. She had never known him scared of anything before. It made him different, almost human. Whatever that thing had been, it had got into their minds. She had felt it picking over the mundane details of her life on the base, running checks as experiments progressed slowly on. And she knew Jackson thought himself a closed book.

`There's got to be something,' said the Doctor. 'Tell me, what are you working on here?'

Àll sorts of things,' said Varani.

Ìn summary, please. Anything might help.'

They told him, hurrying through the details. He didn't want their early conclusions or anything like that, just what the experiments were, what equipment was used. There was a wealth of work going on, of course: looking for water and metals and helium 3; the efforts to use

the soil for building and growing... Gire saw the Doctor's eyes shine with excitement as they explained it to **him.**

Yet the woman, Evelyn, seemed nonplussed by it all — she looked too much the artsy type anyway. Jackson and Varani were thrilled by the Doctor's incisive questions, his evident expertise. But Gire found herself more and more uneasy.

Who was this guy? Where had he come from?

Ànd that's everything?'

`Yes, Doctor,' said Varani.

`What can you do with it?' asked Jackson.

`Well, there are a number of possible options...' said the Doctor, too easily.

`Doctor?' asked Evelyn, in a tone that brooked no argument. 'What can we do?'

The Doctor took her hand and patted it. 'I don't think there's anything,' he said.

He smiled, but there was little conviction in it. 'I'll think of something.'

It felt like hours had passed, but it had merely been minutes. Still the mind l' creature had not come back. But Varani knew, as they all did, that it would have to return sometime. Gire had tried to call through to Houston, but the relay was dead. The aerial might have been damaged in the dust storm, or the creature could have wilfully sabotaged it. Whatever the case, they were on their own.

Jackson and the Doctor were arguing — Jackson sure they could make explosives that would work in the vacuum if only they packed in enough fuel. The Doctor kept trying to explain that the dust storm would just ride through any explosion, and might even absorb the energy to become stronger. Gire had then chipped in

.41 with —

Oh, it was all so stupid!

Varani prowled back to the sleeping cabin, just to get away from the others.

There was never enough space on the base, and now there were two more bodies to avoid.

She had a few mementoes of home at the bottom of her kit bag. A photo of her parents, a small stuffed toy panda... Things she wanted to be near if they weren't going to make it. She knew they weren't going to. The Doctor and Evelyn had **come** to solve a mystery, they'd said. It was obvious now. The mystery of what had jac happened to their mission, how they'd died. She'd seen how Evelyn looked at kson and Gire, a strange fascination in her eyes as she matched the real people to the things she knew about them from the future. To the things she knew would **befall** them. And now they were caught up in it too.

She gathered up Panda and went over to the porthole, the one facing away from 1 41

where the dust storm had attacked them. Again, that glorious, tranquil view of the Moon's surface. She pressed up against the glass, the surface cold on her nose.

Her arm brushed against the stocking she had hung up earlier that evening, when things had seemed so very different.

It must be Christmas Day now, she thought. She was going to die on Christmas Day... Varani stopped. Once again, she brushed her arm against the stocking. She gasped.

The stocking was full.

Gire leapt to her feet as Varani came running through, waving the giant sock in front of her. Jackson took it from her, Gire tried to calm her down.

Ìt isn't possible!' Varani was saying, over and over again

Ìt's okay,' said Gire. 'Calm down. Tell us what you saw...'

Jackson inspected the sock. His jaw fell open. He tipped the contents out on to the table where he and the Doctor had been discussing options. Walnuts, brazil nuts, satsumas and chocolate coins rolled out. It didn't seem possible that they could have all fitted.

`You can't have smuggled this aboard,' said Gire. 'We were checked for solid foodstuffs.'

Ìt wasn't me,' said Varani. 'I never...'

Ìt rather seems you've been visited by Father Christmas...' said the Doctor.

Gire whirled round on him. 'You had something to do with this, did you?'

The Doctor's face twitched, unsure whether to smile or not. 'It is Christmas,' he said. 'I didn't think it would do any harm.'

Àny harm?' Gire stabbed his collarbone with one of her fingers, the same place Jackson had hit him. He howled with pain. 'We're in enough trouble here without you —' she said.

`He did stop the creature before, Nat,' said Jackson, busy peeling one of the satsumas.

`You're not taken in by him?' she snapped.

`Well, you know,' said Jackson. 'These *are* full of vitamin C.'

`What harm can it do?' asked Evelyn, who had been asleep in one of the medical hammocks.

`Harm?' said Gire. 'I'm not going to spend my last remaining hours —'

She stopped, and looked down at the treats strewn across the table. When was the last time they'd had proper food? Months ago. The Doctor gallantly pulled out a chair for her and she plumped down in it.

Òh, hell,' she said. 'I don't suppose anyone thought to bring a nutcracker?'

The food, real food, made Varani feel better, more secure. Ready to face anything, now.

Evelyn was teaching the astronauts how to play gin rummy when the attack came. There was little warning. One minute silence, but for the cracking open of brazil nuts, then the terrible noise of dust scraping at the portholes and ransacking the outside of the base.

Varani screamed, her voice lost in the storm. She grabbed Panda, and memory stung her hard. Dad stood awkwardly in the souvenir shop at the space centre, a look on his face like a lost dog.

'Here,' he said, and handed her the paper bag with the soft toy stuffed into it.

There weren't any more words to be said. She knew what he was struggling to get across and...

Wumf!

She was suddenly back in the cabin, tears streaming down her face. Blood dripped from her nose on to the tabletop. The Doctor and Gire were running to the porthole.

Wu *mf!*

`What is it?' called Evelyn, putting her glasses back on.

Ìt's throwing things at us!' said Gire.

Wumf

`He's not a very good shot, thankfully,' said the Doctor. 'It's all falling just short **of** us.'

Varani struggled to her feet and hurried over.

Wumf!

A lunar rover smacked down into the dust outside, sending up a cloud of grey powder all round it. The great heavy car fell silently. The wumf was the dust hitting **the** outside of the base.

Wumf!

All sorts of things were raining down. Various bits of simple electrical kit. Some **kind** of relay. A ragged flag, showing the old stars and stripes...

'You know what it is, don't you?' asked the Doctor, laughing. It didn't seem **funny** to Varani.

'It's all stuff from previous Moon missions,' said Jackson. 'The Apollo experiments... that's one of the pods they fired at the surface to see what it was **made** of...'

'You don't think this thing's just cross because of the mess we've made, do you?'

asked Evelyn.

'Or it's fighting what it sees as an invasion,' said the Doctor.

'But that's —' began Gire.

'It's what?' snapped the Doctor. Ì'd say this creature's been quite reasonable.

You people come stumbling about in your size 12s, disturbing the quiet. I take it you know how much denser the frail atmosphere is as a result of your landings?

And then you go leaving your rubbish behind you, just like you've spoilt all your **own** beaches and parks. No wonder one of the locals is annoyed!'

'We could have brought any kind of infections or anything with us...' said **Varani.** It seemed so awful; they had meant no harm.

'Oh, come on,' said Gire. 'You don't sympathise with the monster trying to kill **Ss, do** you?'

'Well,' said Varani. 'I can just see it might have a point.'

Wumf!

'**If it** is trying to kill us.'

They all turned. The Doctor was stroking his top lip with his index finger as he scrutinised the fallen debris outside.

'Doctor,' muttered Evelyn, 'you're not explaining things again.'

He shrugged. 'It just doesn't feel like it's attacking,' he said. 'I should know. I've been attacked by all kinds of monsters. You get a feel for it.'

Varani's nose had still not stopped bleeding. She sniffed, tasted blood at the back of her throat. 'You think it's just tidying up after us?'

'Oh, I think it's something more than that,' said the Doctor, reaching forward and squeezing the bridge of her nose sharply. There was an instant of pain, and then all the pain had gone. Her nose had stopped bleeding. She felt suddenly bright-eyed and awake. The Doctor had gone over to the airlock, and was now pulling on the flimsy plastic

overalls she'd seen earlier.

'You're not going outside!' said Evelyn.

'I can't think of any other alternative,' said the Doctor, pressing the controls by the airlock. 'You lot won't survive too many more of those mental visitations. I'm a little bit more resilient.'

'But, Doctor!'

The inner airlock door pinged open.

'I'll try not to be too long.'

'You can't be serious,' said Jackson, running forward to stop him.

The Doctor held up his hand. 'Evelyn, if anything happens, then these people will look after you...'

He stepped through the airlock and was gone.

After the cramped, sweaty confines of the moonbase, it was a blessed relief to step out under the infinite dark sky. The plastic of the atmosphere suit rustled as he sighed, revelling in the quiet and calm.

WUMF!

The TARDIS tumbled over into the ground, moon dust exploding all round it.

Even in the low gravity, it was quite a feat to have hurled the time and space machine so many miles across the lunar crater. Well, thought the Doctor, that would at least save them a walk later on.

The atmosphere suit rustled again, but not from his breathing.

The Doctor glared up at the dust storm as it whirled towards him. The plastic suit billowed around his clothes. He stood firm.

'What is it you want?' he called out. The words got no further than his coverall, and were lost to the vacuum.

But the dust seemed to hear them. It swirled silently back and forth, unnatural in the brilliant sunlight. The Doctor could see the energy lines coursing through the storm, like magnetic fields picked out by iron filings. He racked his brains, trying to match the creature in front of him to anything he'd met before.

The moon dust reached out to him. As he was engulfed, the Doctor could imagine Evelyn's stricken face behind him as she watched from the porthole. He would show no fear, for her sake.

The dust probed his atmosphere suit, trying to find purchase. Then the storm 144

withdrew, swirling just a few feet in front of him. It was utterly quiet, utterly strange. And slowly a shape began to form, deep within the maelstrom. Gradually, a crude humanoid form emerged. A man made of moon dust.

`What is it you want?' asked the Doctor again.

A gash cut across the shapeless head, a crude approximation of a mouth. The voice howled out, reaching into the Doctor's mind. The thing had not spoken in centuries, and he could hear the great effort of will to fashion the words.

Ì saw a light on...'

Gire watched the Doctor hunch over the table, drinking down the last of the tea from the food-tube. He was exhausted — conversation with the creature, he said, having used up all his telepathic powers.

Ìt's like a moth attracted to the flame,' he said. 'It hasn't spoken to anything for centuries. It just wanted to say hello.'

`That's ridiculous!' said Gire. 'It attacked us!'

Ìt was trying to communicate,' said Varani.

Ìt was in our heads!'

`Well, yes,' said the Doctor, like it was obvious. 'He's an entirely telepathic entity.'

Ìt wanted to play,' said Evelyn. 'Crashing all those things outside, like a dog dropping its toys at your feet.'

The Doctor laughed. 'Yes, I think it was.'

`So what are we going to do with it now?' asked Gire. She couldn't believe how angry she felt, or how easily the others had all surrendered to their attacker. They **had** nearly all died, and now...

'I thought we could invite him in for dinner,' said the Doctor.

`What?'

'Oh, he won't be any trouble. Doesn't eat anything anyway, not physically. He's hungry for thoughts and ideas, for company.'

`You're kidding?'

No, I'm —'

Machinery buzzed behind them. The relay back to Houston had come online.

Gire

rushed over and pulled on the headset.

`Hello, Houston!' she said. `Gire receiving.'

`Hello, Gire!' said Draca, and she could even hear the sound of his beard against **the** microphone. 'Thought we'd lost you for a few minutes there.' His familiar, unshakeable tone made her feel so much better.

1 , 'Our friend must have repaired the damage to your aerial,' said the Doctor, **behind** her.

`What was that?' asked Draca. 'That Jackson?'

`Yes,' said Gire quickly, not sure why she lied. Perhaps she just couldn't bear to **tell** Draca something had gone wrong. It would ruin his night if she did. 'We had **tome** bother with the aerial. All fine now.'

`Good, good. Figured as much. Anything to report, then?'

Gire hesitated. She didn't look round, could feel the others' eyes boring into the 145

back of her. She should say something. They'd made contact. They'd made history.

Made history so worthy people had come from the future to see it for themselves...

In which case everything was as it should be, wasn't it?

A thought struck her, a terrible thought. She made her decision.

`Nah,' she said brightly. 'Gonna have something to eat.'

`righto,' said Draca. 'Have a good one. Happy Christmas '

Ànd you,' she said, and cut the connection. Still she couldn't look round. She couldn't believe what she'd just done. It was against all the rules. But if these people had come from the future...

`Well,' said the Doctor, breaking the uneasy silence. 'Should I go let our guest in?'

No one answered. Gire felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked up. Jackson cocked his head to one side in that way she hated. 'What you reckon?'

Gire rolled her eyes. 'It is Christmas,' she said. `So why not?'

Varani didn't know what to feel, torn between revulsion and delight. The creature was old and found maintaining the humanoid form difficult. As it stepped through the airlock into the dressing room, it left pale footprints of dust behind it.

Ì'm sorry,' it struggled to say, its mouth an ugly scar in its otherwise featureless head. The thing didn't even have eyes.

Òh, I wouldn't worry about that,' said the Doctor cheerily, as if eager to take charge. 'We don't stand on ceremony here. I wasn't even going to wear my jacket.'

He tried to pat the creature reassuringly on the back, and his arm brushed right through and emerged out the other side. 'Oops,' he said, grabbing the offending arm back. 'Do excuse me.'

They went through to the kitchen quarters, and crowded around the small work surface where the astronauts ate their meals. There were three portions of roast turkey in food-tubes, and the astronauts shared the squeezy-meals with the Doctor and Evelyn. It was awkward at first, forced and unnatural as they negotiated each other's elbows. Evelyn suggested that the creature should have a name.

`Something festive?' asked Varani. 'Bob! After Bob Cratchit in A Christmas Carol?'

Òr Auggie, after *Auggie Wren's* Christmas?' suggested Jackson.

Gire was looking serious. 'What about Dusty?' she said.

Nobody spoke. And then, surprising them all, came a terrible, wonderful noise.

It took a moment to understand what was happening. The creature was laughing.

So Dusty it was.

After that, Christmas dinner was a great success. The thought creature sat back in his seat, leaking moon dust as he laughed at their stories and jokes. He seemed to get stronger, more confident, the more tales they told, and his ability to speak improved drastically. As they finished the food-tubes, Dusty regaled them with stories of his own people — a whole civilisation consisting entirely of thought, spread out across a hundred worlds, none of them knowing which planet had been their original home. It made Varani feel so parochial, their great venture to the Moon so small a step. They'd only just begun.

Dusty went on, explaining how a silly error on his part had got him stranded on 146

a practically dead bit of rock for a thousand years, millions of miles from his own people.

'That's terrible!' said Varani. She'd been feeling far from home herself, today of all days.

'Yes,' said Dusty, and the hole in his head approximated the shape of lips and teeth and tongue.

'I' m sure we can give you a lift, though,' said Evelyn. 'The Doctor would —' She stopped, looking all round. 'Where is the Doctor?'

His chair was empty, but no one had seen him go. Quite a trick, being his size and in a cabin so confined. They called out, but no response. Jackson checked the room where the toilet was, Gire ran round the network of cabins... but nothing.

'He's too big to lose,' Evelyn was saying when they heard the airlock ping. They all hurried out to investigate.

'Sorry to worry you all,' said the Doctor, tugging off his plastic coveralls. 'I didn't want anyone to notice. You see, I'm not really meant to do this...'

He held open the carrier bag he'd brought with him. Varani could see,

nestled within, a bottle of brandy and one wrapped Christmas pudding.

;Veil,' said Evelyn as she helped the Doctor wash the small number of implements

:they'd used. 'That seemed to go all right, didn't it?'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, rinsing the plate they'd used for the pudding. 'But I can't

' **believe** Dr Gire had never heard of a sixpence before! What do they teach these **Astronauts** nowadays?'

Evelyn thumped him lightly on the arm. The Doctor was in one of his roguish r

oods — happy but jittery and wanting to get on. It was probably all those helpings **of pudding,** she thought. They would be off soon, leaving their new friends long **ehind them.**

I **She leant** in close. 'And what about our mystery?' she whispered. 'We still **ven't got to the bottom** of that, have we?'

The Doctor continued to scrub at the scalpel they'd used as a cake knife. 'No,'

e admitted. 'But I have an idea...'

'You don't have any idea!' she protested. If there was one thing sure to infuriate **r** about the Doctor, it was his constant insistence that he always knew what was **ing** on. The number of times they'd got hopelessly lost because he refused to **ck the** map.

'I know,' said Gire. Evelyn whirled round. The other two astronauts and the dust **ature** were still crowded round the table in the other cabin, but Gire had snuck **on** them. Her gaze was intense, unflinching, and Evelyn had to look away.

'What do you know?' asked the Doctor casually, continuing with his work.

Gire took a breath. 'We're all going to die, aren't we?' she said. 'That's why **u're here.'**

Evelyn wanted to say something, anything, but she knew that look on the **ctor's** face. In these sorts of instance, he was in charge: the Time

Lord's **rogative.** He dried his hands on a tea towel, then leant against the edge of the **k and** looked Gire in the eye.

1 47

Èverybody dies,' he said, not unkindly. 'In time.'

`But with us,' said Gire, 'nobody ever knows why. That's the big mystery you're here to find out about.'

`You must understand we can't tell you anything,' said the Doctor. 'It's simple cause and effect...' Evelyn could have slapped him for being so clinical about it, so cruel. She wanted desperately to explain. Yet Gire seemed quite content with the news.

'Of course,' she said. 'And I don't want to know any more. I don't want to know when or how or anything about it.'

`Good,' said the Doctor. 'Make the most of whatever time you do have, eh?

However long you've got.'

Gire nodded, biting her lip. 'I'm glad you came,' she said. 'You've done a good thing today, bringing Christmas.' Laughter rippled through from the next cabin, where Jackson's tales were getting more risque. Gire looked back over her shoulder, and smiled. 'Let's not spoil it for the others, huh?'

Again Evelyn wanted to say something, but a glance from the Doctor halted het He was right, of course. They couldn't explain. It was cheating.

`You sure you're going to be all right?' she asked, and felt horribly stupid for it.

`Yeah,' said Gire. 'But I could do with a drink, you know? Let's see if they've left us any brandy.'

She hurried back to the others. Evelyn turned on the Doctor, furious at what he'd made Gire think. And he winked at her.

`Trust me,' he said.

Varani had thought she'd known her colleagues, knew all about them. But as the last of the bottle got passed around, she realised she hardly knew a thing.

Jackson's story about the mix-up at his dad's funeral was at once harrowing and hilarious, full of brilliant insights that made it come alive.

`You've a real gift for stories,' said Dusty, who now had eyes and ears. 'You'd be the toast of my people.'

`The gab's a family trait,' Jackson said. 'You should meet my brother.'

`Perhaps I will.'

Ànd his son's very readable too,' agreed Evelyn, her cheeks glowing. The brandy was long gone.

'I didn't know you had a son,' said Gire, leaning into him. She was in a funny, flirty mood, Varani noticed. Probably the drink.

Ì, uh, don't,' he said. 'I don't think.'

Òh, that's right,' said Evelyn quietly, looking down at her hands. 'We can't talk about that yet.'

`No, we can't,' said the Doctor. There was an awkward moment.

Àh, well,' said Jackson, draping his arm around Gire's shoulder. It had never occurred to Varani how well the two of them fitted. She suddenly felt a pang, at being left outside their easy intimacy. 'There's time enough for that...'

`Yes,' said Gire, and Varani noticed how she looked over at the Doctor, who looked quickly away. Ì guess there is.' What was that about, then?

There was quiet — that strange but natural lull in conversation that Varani's mother used to say meant an angel was passing. Or that someone was stepping over your grave. She thought of her earlier fears, that they were on borrowed time and nobody would ever even know why they died. Varani sat forward, bristling at the idea. The alcohol was making her morbid.

`How about a photo?' she said, eager to be busy.

`Yeah,' said Gire, untangling herself from Jackson. 'Good idea.'

Ì'm not so sure...' said the Doctor.

Òh, don't be shy!' Varani laughed. 'This is history in the making!' She scrambled out of her chair to look for the camera.

Èxactly,' said the Doctor quietly.

But Varani wasn't taking no for an answer. Dusty struggled to understand what was going on, until the first slick photograph slid from the machine and developed in front of his powdery eyes. The expression on his strange, near-human face was exquisite.

`You preserve moments of time in this way?' he said.

`They're not as long-lived as us,' said the Doctor. 'Their moments are more precious.'

They posed again and again, each taking turns with the camera. Dusty was desperate to have a go, but his fingers were still a little crude and he couldn't work the tiny button on his own. Evelyn, not entirely in charge of herself either, volunteered to help.

`Ready?' asked Dusty, his voice warm and engaging.

`Hang on!' said the Doctor, ducking out of frame. He hurried over, and inspected the camera which Dusty and Evelyn held almost steady between them.

%ha!' he said, and turned a dial until it clicked.

`Ready now?' asked Dusty again.

`Yeah!' the astronauts called back.

À little to the left I think, Jackson,' suggested the Doctor.

`Cheeeeese!`

The flash went off. Startled, Dusty and Evelyn collapsed backwards.

Varani woke, sprawled in an unladylike manner on the floor under her hammock.

She wasn't bruised, as far as she could tell, so she must just not have got into bed **at all.** Her teeth felt furry and her head was a mess. The brandy, she realised, after so long without alcohol.

She got to her feet. It helped to have things to hold on to, just to steady herself.

She checked her wristwatch. A little after midnight, Florida time. Boxing Day.

Christmas was over.

Ànу coffee?' asked Jackson groggily. He and Gire were in one of the other hammocks. The hammocks barely held one, thought Varani, so they had to be pretty well entangled. She probed how she felt about that. Yes, it was going to **make** things different, even difficult sometimes. But she'd be okay with it, really.

Good on them.

'I could pop out and get some,' she replied breezily. 'Be back in a month or so.'

`Not to worry,' said Jackson, and went back to sleep.

Varani went to find water. The kitchen cabin was immaculate, everything tidied away. She scratched her head, trying to remember the tail end of the evening.

More stories, more jokes. Gire trying to get them to play charades, trying anything to hide how well she and Jackson were getting it on...

No, that was it. Then sleep.

But the Doctor and Evelyn and Dusty were gone. They had to have cleaned up behind them. All evidence of them was gone too. The empty bottle of brandy, the wrapping from *the* Christmas pudding, all but one of their photographs...

Nothing incriminating had been left behind. It was like they had never been.

It was probably easier that way, she thought.

She never had to say so to Jackson or Gire. Without ever discussing it, the astronauts never mentioned the events of that day again.

There were only two, small mementoes of that day, and Varani held

on to neither.

The sixpence she had won in her pudding, Gire later passed on to her son, born years after their return to the Earth.

And then there was the picture of the three astronauts that Dusty and Evelyn had taken. It was put aside, probably under something, and they missed it when they shipped out. The photo was not seen again for more than a century, when a salvage crew picked over the old lunar base, looking for morsels of value.

By that time, the three astronauts who had lived there were dead.

And not long after that...

The auction hall, Evelyn decided, tried too hard to be steeped in history. The teleportation booths were gilded in baroque style, and the row upon row of gravity-defying seats had something of Louis XV about them. Even the machines serving the drinks and canapes had been designed to look — if you squinted — like they sported Edwardian morning dress. Travelling with the Doctor had taught Evelyn many things, but one lesson she felt sure never to forget was how silly it was to get precious about history. After all, the dead and buried were people too.

Which made the parade of artefacts on offer today even more mawkish, she felt.

They *were* all silly, personal items of no great intrinsic value other than that they'd all once been to the Moon. That was, back in the days when going to the Moon had meant something, as the Doctor had explained. Context was all, of course.

Indeed, holding the auction in Lunatic City itself seemed disrespectful of the efforts made by those early pioneers. These days, being on the Moon didn't really mean anything. They might as well have been sitting in Basingstoke.

Evelyn supped from her glass of Chateau Copernicus — genuine Champagne-method, the Doctor had said — and guiltily perused the programme of food-tubes and squeezy-meals, keep-sakes, sketches and sundry other scraps. She was bored. It wasn't anything as exciting as the Darren Jackson book. He'd made the early lunar settlements so vivid and thrilling. His parents and their shipmate had indeed been extraordinary — returning to Earth to be prolific in everything: science, the arts, politics. As their son said, it was as if they'd looked

from afar and decided its problems needed fixing. Or maybe the dangers they'd faced on a day-to-day basis had given them a lust for good living. Whatever it was, they had set an example to the pioneers that followed.

But there was nothing about that in the dry programme in her lap. The shopping list of artefacts lacked any kind of social history, any kind of life. And there was nothing about the great unsolved mystery, either.

Evelyn looked round. No, now she looked for them, there were other conspiracy nuts in attendance. She felt glad — cruelly glad — that they all looked far less socially able than herself and the Doctor.

'Lot 301,' called the sleazy fellow running proceedings. 'A single photograph, slight damage to one corner. Letters of evidence and all according proofs.'

The people around her sat forward in their seats. Yes, this was going to be the highlight of the day. Evelyn only sighed. The Doctor had already told her this snap would sell for a trillion-and-a-half lunar dollars.

'It's just a picture,' she muttered as the bidding took off. Beside her, the Doctor shook his head.

'That's not what's got them going,' he said. 'It's a timer-recorded photo taken sometime in the first December at the base.'

'And?'

He prodded the low-resolution print in her programme. 'Look at the side there...'

She scrutinised the image. Three astronauts, arms round one another, grinning inanely like everyone always does. Living conditions were basic, and there was little else to be seen.

And then she noticed it. The blocky pixels made it difficult to be sure, but...

'It looks like that's someone else's shadow!'

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'As if there's someone just out of shot. And look

at the angle of the picture too. That's not taken with a timer. They'd have put the camera on something flat. That, Evelyn, was taken by somebody else.'

'But who?'

The Doctor shrugged.

'You mean even you don't know the answer?'

'No.'

She laughed, attracting stern looks from others in the audience. Geeks never **had** much of a sense of humour anyway.

'**I** find that very hard to believe, Doctor,' she whispered.

They watched the auction. She was aware of him smiling smugly beside her, and **tied to** ignore it. Eventually, she had to ask.

'What?'

He looked, if anything, even more smug about it. 'Unless,' he said, 'we go see **for ourselves...**'

15 1

The Anchorite's Echo

Scott And rews

An Adventure of the Seventh Doctor,

with Dorothy 'Ace' McShane

I have measured out my penitence in Christmases.

It was Christmas Day when they bricked me up in my cell at the back of the church. The choir was making the most beautiful music. The congregation prayed for my good health and gave thanks for my sacrifice as the mason laid the bricks that sealed me in, leaving only a small window through which I could receive food and water.

It was an honour to serve the people of this parish as their anchorite. I became part of the fabric of their church, fasting and praying for the safety of the community that had raised me. I was their talisman, their totem, their good luck charm. My offering served to insure the village

from pestilence and famine and drought and war. As long as I remained in my cell, praising the Lord and begging his mercy, my charges in the world outside would remain safe. No calamity would befall them.

Even now, so many years later, I still ask myself what it was about me that was not worthy...

`Thank you.'

`You are... welcome. Are you... are you an angel?'

`No. Far from it. Too far, sometimes. I am just a man trying to do the right thing.'

`You say that as if you find it difficult.'

`More and more, these days. People keep dying.'

Christmas has changed so much since my penitence began. The rituals, the songs, the prayers are all different. Protestantism holds sway now, and a poor anchorite, a relic of Catholicism, is ignored, an uncomfortable reminder of days past.

I do not speak to my congregation any more. I abide in my cell and watch them worship, waiting for a chance to atone. A chance that finally came this morning, this Christmas morning, when the Demon came to Little Brockton.

It arrived in a flash of hellfire and brimstone. The heavy oak doors of the church, solid for so many centuries, cracked and split and burst inwards with a stench of sulphur. The Demon emerged from the smoke, striding down the aisle towards the altar.

It was a giant, nearly six-feet tall, clad in armour that was scarred and mottled from its time in the Pit. Its face was blood-red, and horns rose from its temples, twisting about its skull like streamers of bone.

In its hand it held what I took to be a pistol of some kind, which it raised and pointed at the priest. A tongue of flame leapt from the weapon and our priest was 153

gone, sucked into a column of smoke and drawn down into the depths of hell itself.

`You...

be... SILENT!' The demon howled at the villagers, who screamed and wailed and cowered in their pews. 'SILENT!' it cried again, and the wailing subsided to a faint sobbing of prayer and supplication.

I wondered if once again I was going to have to watch my community die in torment as I sat helpless to intervene.

`Death is God's judgement, it comes to us all.'

`Hmmm. I suppose you're wondering what all that was about.'

Ì do not wonder. I watch, I wait, I pray.'

`Pray for what?'

Àbsolution for my crimes.'

Òr what?' shouted a voice from outside. A man of normal height stepped through the wreckage of the church doors and walked to the aisle. 'What exactly do you think you're going to do? Where precisely do you imagine you're going to run to?'

The newcomer was dressed in a cream suit of the most uncommon cut. A red necktie dangled from his collar and a straw hat sat atop his head. In his hand he held a walking stick with black cloth furled around it, the purpose of which I was unable to divine. His voice had the faintest Scotch to it, and his gaze darted hither and thither, absorbing the details of his surroundings.

For one instant his sight fell on the small window to my cell, the tiny opening through which I observed these events. His eyes narrowed and his head cocked slightly to one side, as if in curiosity, or recognition. The wisdom, the depth, the compassion in that momentary glance was like a balm to me. This was no ordinary man.

As the fog of smoke from the Demon's entrance dissipated they stood there, facing each other along the church's long aisle — the Demon and the man —

flanked by my congregation, ranged left and right in their pews, too terrified to move.

The man stood still, casually leaning on his stick. The Demon hunched its shoulders and breathed heavily, like a cornered animal. It raised its weapon and pointed first at the pews to the left, then those at its right.

Ìt's over, don't you see that?' said the man, and in his tone he seemed almost to pity the Demon. 'Your plan has failed, your fleet is destroyed, your troops are gone.

There's no *one* left. There's just you. You and your *gun,'* he spat the word with the utmost contempt. 'Can you really hope to conquer a world on your own, with nothing but a single weapon?'

The Demon ceased its wavering, slowly raised itself to its full height and stared the man straight in the eye.

'I no longer need to conquer the whole world, Doctor,' it said. 'I only need to conquer you.'

He raised his gun and aimed it squarely at the man's — the Doctor's — chest.

* * *

154

`What crimes could you possibly have committed, my friend?'

`The greatest crime an anchorite can. I was unworthy.'

Òf what, of whom?'

'Of my congregation. They died, Doctor. They all died.'

`Ha!'

The Demon paused, confused.

`Sorry,' said the Doctor. 'Just struck me as ironic.'

The Demon's gun wavered. 'Ironic?'

`Yes. You came here to conquer the world in order to bring the rule of your gods to its people, to purify them and make them holy, and here you are, committing murder in a temple.'

The Demon gasped. 'Temple?'

`Yes,' replied the Doctor. took around you. This is a holy place. This is where the people of this community come to worship their god.'

`They have gods?' It seemed shocked.

`No, well, not hereabouts, anyway. No, here they worship just the one god.'

The Demon's hideous, misshapen face appeared to register disgust.

Òne god? Only one? Heathens! Peasants. Our gods would strike them down for such blasphemy.'

`Yes, I suppose they would,' said the Doctor. 'But here you are in the house of their god. You've killed their holy man, and you've interrupted their worship on the holiest day in their calendar.'

`You lie,' spat the Demon.

Òh, no, I don't. Today is the day they call Christmas. It's the day they celebrate the birth of their god, the day they believe he came to save them. From the monsters. Monsters like you.'

The Demon appeared confused, uncertain how to respond to this information.

And as it stood there, looking around at the plain church walls that surrounded it, the relics of Catholicism long since stripped away by the puritan zeal for simplicity, I realised that it was afraid.

The Doctor pressed his advantage, walking slowly down the aisle towards the Demon, his echoing footsteps punctuating his words.

`He is a powerful god, you know. More powerful than yours. Yours just pop up every now and then, zap a few sacrifices to keep you in line, tell you which world to conquer next, and then pop off again.'

The Doctor continued his wary progress towards the increasingly agitated Demon. The parishioners sat on either side of him, hands clasped together in mute, terrified prayer.

The god of this world is all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful,' he said. 'If you continue to defile his holy place he will surely strike you down.'

And as the Doctor continued to walk towards certain death, I saw the vestry door behind the Demon crack open.

*

`How did they die?'

`You had rather ask why.'

Àll right, why did they die?'

`Because of me, Doctor. Because of my weakness.'

A face appeared in the doorway, a young girl's face, round and pleasant. Gently, quietly, ever so softly, the girl pushed the vestry door open and squeezed through into the apse. I realised in an instant what the Doctor was doing. He was distracting the Demon, allowing his acolyte to surprise it from behind.

Ì don't believe in your god,' bellowed the Demon. 'Let him strike me down then, if he is so powerful. Let him come and finish me.' It raised its pistol and fired once, incinerating Goodwife Baker in the front pew

The Doctor stopped his advance, appalled.

`That was unnecessary,' he said quietly.

By this time, the girl had crept out through the choir stall and was standing behind the altar. She looked left and right, frantically, as if searching for escape or... yes, a weapon.

She was clad in striped stockings, heavy boots and a dress that mocked all dignity. Atop this she wore a strange black coat, which was covered in sigils of some kind. Her hair had been pulled from her face and tied back harshly. She was the most unwomanly female I had ever seen.

Ì deny your god, Doctor,' the Demon cried. 'I slaughter his followers in his temple and he does nothing. He is a weak god, if he exists at all.'

The Demon stepped forward, emboldened. It strode towards the Doctor until it stood halfway down the church aisle, face to face with its pursuer.

`Let us see if he can save you now,' said the Demon, as it reached out one huge clawed hand and wrapped it around the Doctor's neck. The girl in the apse began to panic. She had lifted an incense burner, its heavy brass weight anchored at the end of a long chain, but the Demon was too far away for her to strike.

The Demon lifted the Doctor off the ground by his throat.

Ànd now, Doctor,' it whispered, 'you shall die. Then so shall all the cattle in this godless temple.'

`What happened?'

Ì had been the anchorite of this parish only two months when the plague came.

Our chandler was the first to fall, succumbing to infestation on his return from market. I prayed and fasted. I scourged myself almost hourly. It was my task to protect my parishioners from such visitation. But try as I might, the pestilence spread. Every day the congregation dwindled away while I, safe in my cell, remained healthy and untouched. My charges were taken by the Lord and I was preserved, left to watch them die, to witness daily the terrible cost of my own unworthiness. I should have saved them, Doctor, but I could not. I was weak, impure, ungodly. It took a long time for the village to die. Farmer Broadbent was the last to succumb. He brought me my last meal and then sat in the final pew, praying for mercy. He died even as I watched. It was Christmas morning, one year 156

to the day from my internment. I had wrought such devastation. Such devastation in only one year.'

'It wasn't your fault. What could you possibly have done?'

`Better tended my immortal soul, Doctor. My purity should have saved them. For if he cannot save the lives of the people in his care, what good is an anchorite?

What purpose does he serve before God?'

'I see. And so you've been sitting patiently here ever since. Waiting for a chance to atone.'

`Yes, Doctor. Waiting. Just waiting. Until today.'

The Doctor's feet were off the ground, kicking helplessly in the air. He dropped his cloth-bound stick, and it clattered to the floor. The girl shouted something, I did not hear what, and ran forward, but she could not possibly reach the Demon before it snapped the Doctor's neck. My parishioners cried out in horror once more.

I stood, peering through my cell window, powerless to intervene. What could I do? Unless I could find some way to prevent this slaughter I would have to watch my village perish one more time. Was

this to be my punishment? Forced to watch communities rising up and being cut down, time and again, a never-ending cycle, **a** reminder of my own failure? The thought was so painful to me that, entirely unconsciously, a strangled sob escaped my breast.

And I heard it.

Could it be that I...?

Without hesitation, I *bellowed.*

`THERE WILL BE NO MORE DEATH IN MY HOUSE!'

The words burst from me and the sound spiralled up, up into the rafters, caught **in** the stone and wood of the ancient building, my cry echoed back and forth, its message amplified by the bones of my church. My voice seemed to fill the very air.

The Demon stopped dead, as if encased in ice. It looked terrified.

`YOU WILL RELEASE MY SERVANT IMMEDIATELY!'

The Demon did so. The Doctor landed cleanly, like a cat, never losing his **balance.**

`**You** see,' said the Doctor. 'I told you so. The god of this place is stronger than **your petty** godlings. He can destroy you like that.' He snapped his fingers in the **face of the** transfixed Demon. Tut down your gun,' he said. 'It's over.'

The girl resumed her progress, heavy brass censer dangling from her hands on its chain.

The Demon hesitated. 'I deny this,' it said, but its hunched shoulders and staring eyes belied its words. 'There is no god here. This is more of your trickery.'

`LAY DOWN YOUR WEAPON, DEMON,' I shouted. 'OR I SHALL STRIKE YOU

DOWN INTO THE VERY PIT OF HELL.'

The girl crept closer, almost there...

`You heard him,' said the Doctor, who had reclaimed his strange stick, and was **Jabbing** its pointed end into the chest of the Demon for emphasis. 'You've seen **What** your gods do to their sacrifices. The piles

of charred corpses, the screams as 157

the flames consume them. That is nothing compared to what this god will do to you if you defy him in his house.'

Closer...

`Your gods can't save you here. You're on enemy territory.'

I could think of no words to add, so I roared my rage at the rafters, and as the cry of fury echoed around the awestruck Demon's ears it desperately turned its gaze to the roof, scanning left and right in terror, awaiting the wrath of a god that it now felt sure was about to descend upon it.

At that precise moment the girl swung the heavy censer in a wide arc and smashed it into the back of the Demon's skull as hard as she could.

The pistol fell to the floor. Unsteady on its feet, the Demon turned to face its attacker, just in time for the censer to strike it once more, square in the face. It stood there for a moment, stunned, and then slowly toppled to the floor, unconscious, my mocking laughter ringing in its ears.

`Because today you did save them.'

`Yes. Yes, I did.'

`Without your intervention I would have been killed, and so would everyone in this church, perhaps even everyone in the world. What was your given name'

`Paul. I was christened Paul.'

`Well, Paul, your words saved your parish. Surely that's atonement enough.

Surely now you can stop waiting.'

`How long has it been, Doctor? How long have I waited, do you know?'

À long time, my friend. Very, very many Christmases It's been three hundred or more, I imagine, since you died.'

`Three hundred, that many and can I go now? Am I released from my

penance?

It is over?'

`Yes, I think so. Rest now, Paul the anchorite. Rest.'

The Revolutionaries

John S. Drew

An Adventure of the Second Doctor,

with Jamie McCrimmon

'I thought you said you'd take us somewhere to celebrate Christmas!' Jamie McCrimmon exclaimed. He gestured before him at the fields of deep snow that covered the forested area. Not a sign of life to be seen for miles around.

Jamie stomped his feet and reached down to rub his bare legs. His usual Scottish kilt and tartan, displaying his clan colours, seemed most appropriate at the moment. Trousers would just get sodden and uncomfortable in a landscape like this. 'It probably is Christmas, I'll grant you, but we're nowhere near anywhere civilised to celebrate it. This is America!' He kicked away at the snow that lay at his feet. 'Try as you might, you'll never convince me that you can control this thing,' he added.

The thing in question was the TARDIS, a tall, blue police box that was really a time machine in disguise. At these words, the Doctor emerged from the ship, his face somewhat solemn. 'Now, Jamie, I don't see any reason to think this isn't Christmas, and as to the location, well...' His face began to curl into a knowing smile. 'I suppose they celebrate Christmas in Trenton, New Jersey...' His words trailed off thoughtfully as he pulled out a telescope from one of the pockets of his long, dark coat.

As the Doctor scanned the area, Jamie couldn't help but wonder once again what it was that made him continue his adventures with the time traveller. He certainly was an odd sight standing there with his mop of hair set upon a craggy face that could beam with warmth or, with just a change of thought, become suddenly cold and austere. His dark jacket and baggy chequered trousers were not the height of fashion in any century they'd yet visited. In fact, Polly Wright, a

former travelling companion of theirs, had once remarked that he looked like a fifth beetle — and Jamie could easily see the Doctor as some small, foraging insect.

Àh, ha!' the Doctor suddenly exclaimed. 'Jamie, take a look at this.'

The Doctor handed his companion the telescope and waited for a response.

`Will you look at that?' said Jamie 'It looks like some sort of fortress or something. And they must be magicians! They've put candles in the branches of that tree!'

Ìt's a Christmas tree, Jamie. It's traditional. I think this is definitely where we shall spend our holiday.'

Ì don't know, Doctor,' Jamie replied. 'That doesn't look like such a welcome place.' He could make out the dark, foreboding walls that surrounded the complex and saw a number of guards, armed with rifles, slowly walk across the parapet.

`Nonsense, Jamie,' the Doctor said, walking off as he spoke. 'It's Christmas, isn't it? Every place is a welcome place at Christmas.'

Jamie sighed. He knew it was next to impossible to sway the Doctor from his 159

path once he had put his mind to something. He placed a cautious hand on the handle of his dirk as he followed the Doctor.

Jamie could only roll his eyes as he and the Doctor were pushed roughly into a holding cell an hour later. The heavy clang of the cell door mixed with the echo of old boots shuffling away from the prison. The Doctor sighed as he settled himself on to the floor and placed his head upon his hands.

Ìs that all you're going to do, then?' Jamie asked. As usual, his Scottish accent became thicker as his annoyance grew.

Tor the moment, Jamie,' the Doctor said reservedly. He took in a deep breath and smiled. Not exactly like Christmas at home, is it?'

Jamie grunted and looked about at his surroundings. Theirs was one of a series of metal cages, crudely welded together as though in a hurry. They looked to be better suited for keeping livestock rather than human beings. The cell itself contained no furniture. A thin layer

of hay covered the floor. With his own knife taken from him, Jamie had few options. He walked over to the cell door and tested the strength of the bars. They failed to budge.

`Forget it, mate,' a thick cockney voice called from across the way. Jamie looked over and saw a tall, young man standing inside the cell opposite. An attractive woman was sitting on the floor behind him. Both were dressed in blue jumpsuits that looked particularly out of place for the time period. Jamie's eyes opened in surprise as he spotted a wristwatch on the arm of the man.

`Hey! Who are you?'

The man smiled an infuriating smile. It reminded Jamie of the way the Doctor looked when Jamie was beginning to grasp what should have been a simple concept. 'My name is Edward and this is my wife, Stephanie. I take it you're not from around here?'

`No,' Jamie answered simply. 'But then neither are you.'

`You're right,' the man said, nodding. He took a step back and opened his arms out wide. 'We're from what you would refer to as the thirtieth century.' He aimed 11:1

the strange wristwatch he was wearing at Jamie, then checked the reading. 'You, on the other hand, appear to be from *before* the 177os. How did you wind up here?'

Jamie gestured towards the Doctor who was getting up off the floor now. 'Ask him.'

`You say you're from the future?' the Doctor asked curiously as he stepped up to the cell door. The look on Edward's face at the Doctor's appearance drew a quick smile from the time traveller.

`Yes,' Edward replied. He cocked his head. 'But I can't quite make you out. You can't be from the far future.'

`Quite far actually,' the Doctor said.

Stephanie rose from the floor and stood beside her husband. She looked the Doctor and Jamie up and down. Not much for fashion in your time, are they?'

`Yes, well, never mind that.' The Doctor's face became serious in a flash. 'What are you doing here?'

'I should ask the same of you,' Edward replied.

160

À simple desire to celebrate Christmas,' the Doctor said. 'But that's not the case with you, is it?'

`We're teachers,' Stephanie said. 'I specialise in history, while Edward here is an English professor. We wanted to see some of this period in order to get a better perspective for our students. You know how history tends to get its own facts mixed up over time... Anyway, we booked this package with the Time Brokers —

and voila! Here we are.'

`But what are you doing in the holding cell of a Hessian garrison?' the Doctor asked. 'And who are these Time Brokers when they're at home?'

Edward's face blushed slightly. 'They can book you a trip to any time period you desire.' He looked at his wife. 'I thought their equipment looked a little shoddy.'

Stephanie sighed. 'Don't start this again. You wouldn't know a top-of-the-line time-travel machine from something out of a cereal box.' She turned to face the Doctor. 'It seemed normal and we had heard so many wonderful things from friends who had booked trips with them. We wanted to investigate the past so we set up this trip. The problem was that instead of placing us in England at this time, we got dumped in Trenton instead.'

Ànd we were immediately captured,' Edward added.

The Doctor nodded. 'I see. But surely you could pull out. You must have some sort of failsafe. That wristwatch, perhaps?'

The two lifted their wrists for the time travellers to see. 'We can leave at any time, Doctor. But there has been another little hitch in our visit.'

Before Edward could explain, a sound caught their attention: a heavy door opening and a body being dragged down the hallway. Two guards deposited the body in the cell next to the Doctor's, letting it collapse to the ground with a dull thud. They didn't say a word as they turned and walked out of the cellblock.

The body lay prone a moment before groaning and starting to rise.

Ìt looks like they worked him over well,' Jamie said. 'Take it easy there.'

Ànd there in lies our problem,' Edward said.

Ì don't understand.'

The new occupant of the prison rose slowly, dizzy from the change in altitude.

He steadied himself before standing to his full height. He was a stern, imposing figure, with a solemn face hidden by bruises.

The Doctor's jaw dropped at the sight of the man. 'Oh, my word! You're George Washington!'

The recognised leader of the revolutionary forces in America looked towards the Doctor with a puzzled face. 'Do I know you, sir?'

The Doctor grinned mischievously. 'No, sir, but I know you. And I know that you are not supposed to be in this holding cell.'

Òn that we concur,' Washington replied as he eyed Jamie cautiously. 'And what have they got you in here for, Highlander? Certainly not desertion?'

Ì'm not a deserter,' Jamie said with indignation. Ì'd never leave the Doctor.'

Ì don't think that's what he meant, Jamie,' the Doctor said softly. 'Tell me, General, why are you here?'

À crazy scheme of mine,' he said, wincing as he clutched his battered ribs. 'I thought that with the nor'easter blowing through the area and everyone making merry for Christmas, it would be a perfect opportunity to strike.' He took hold of the cell bars to steady himself. 'I was wrong.'

The Doctor looked over to the two time travellers in the opposite cell. Edward shrugged, his face turning a slight shade of crimson. 'I see,' the Doctor said slowly.

Jamie caught the look in the Doctor's eye and snapped his fingers. 'You're doing it! You're thinking of a way out of here.'

`Quiet, Jamie!' the Doctor snapped. More gently, he said, 'Something terrible has happened here, history has been changed by these people.' He gestured at Edward and Stephanie. 'And it'll all have to be sorted out. Now, whatever happens, do not interfere, understood?'

Òh, aye,' Jamie said, nodding his head. 'But what can I —'

`Not a word,' the Doctor cut in. 'It's vital we set history back on course, or this will be the first of many sad Christmases to come.'

The Doctor stepped over to the cell entrance and pulled out his trusted recorder.

He began to run the instrument along the bars of the cell, causing an awful din. 'I say! I'd like to have a word with the commandant! I have vital information for him!'

Washington's eyes opened at the sound of this. 'What? What could you possibly know?'

Ìsn't anyone going to listen? Doesn't anyone care?' The Doctor continued his rant, ignoring the general. A few moments later the door opened and the two guards entered. One of them held a pistol to the Doctor in a threatening manner, a clear signal to stop the noise.

The Doctor smiled warmly, but looked into the eyes of the gunman. 'Please, I must see Herr Commandant.'

The guard gave the little man a quizzical look. 'Herr Commandant?'

`Yes,' the Doctor replied, straightening his back and trying to sound all official.

Ì have information I must pass on to him. Information that will help in the war effort.'

Jamie stepped up to the Doctor and whispered, 'He doesn't understand a word you're saying.'

Ì told you to be quiet, Jamie,' the Doctor said quickly out of the side of his mouth. Aloud, he added, 'Well? Or at least tell me your names so that when I do finally meet the commandant, I can tell him of your incompetence.'

The two guards looked at each other and exchanged a chuckle. One of them nodded to the other, who produced a key from his pocket. As the

one kept his gun trained on the Doctor and Jamie, the other opened the cell door.

The Doctor stepped out quickly, allowing the guard to shut the door behind him.

Washington threw himself against the cell door, nearly sending himself backwards with the reverberation. 'You cannot do this! Do not tell them anything!'

The Doctor merely looked away as he was led off by the two guards. The door to the prison slammed shut and the room became quiet. Washington fixed Jamie with an angry glare. 'Your friend is going to sign the death warrants of thousands of good men if he divulges anything of importance!'

Edward sighed from his side of the cell. 'Out of the frying pan and into the fire.'

Jamie looked from the leader of the revolutionaries to the two time travellers.

Ìt's going to be all right. The Doctor knows what he's doing.' He added, quietly so they wouldn't hear, 'I hope.'

It was well over an hour before the door to the prison opened and the Doctor was once again pushed unceremoniously into his cell. The guards eyed Washington carefully as they left.

Jamie went quickly to the Doctor's side. 'Are you all right?'

`Never mind that, man,' Washington snapped. 'What did you say?'

`Surely you must realise you only made matters worse?' Edward chimed in.

The Doctor placed his hands up in a placating gesture. 'Please, please. If you'll just relax a moment, everything will become apparent shortly.'

Ì do not know what it is you told them, Doctor, but if I ever get my hands on you...' said Washington, turning his back and striking angrily at his cell wall.

`General,' the Doctor said. 'You had the correct idea in making this

attack on the Hessian garrison. The soldiers had their guard down as it was Christmas. They were easy pickings.' He stopped and looked somewhat cross at the time travellers in the cell across from him. 'Unfortunately, these two young people upset the course of history with their curiosity.'

Ì told you, it wasn't our fault,' Edward said meekly.

Ìn order to set things right on track, it is necessary to have the Hessians drop their guard once again.'

With that, the Doctor stepped over to the window of the cell. In the courtyard beyond, several guards were gathered around a makeshift bonfire. They passed around a bottle, swigging and laughing merrily. One of them burst into song.

Ìt's Hark the Herald Angels Sing,' Stephanie said.

`That's not how it sounds,' Edward pointed out.

`The words are the same. They're singing in German so it's hard for you to understand, but the music is different. The version we all know won't be created for another sixty years or so.'

'Fib, yes,' the Doctor mused. 'I can see you're the history teacher. Tell me, does it ever mention Washington being captured at any point during his attack on Trenton?'

Stephanie shook her head. 'No. When the attack failed, we knew we must have ruined things. We have to put them right again, don't we? We can't ever go home until we do...'

The Doctor smiled. 'History has a way of remembering what it wants to.' He stepped over to the cell door and produced a small, cylindrical device from his pocket. It emitted a sharp whine and a bright white light. There was a click from the lock of the door, and a wisp of steam curled gently from it. The Doctor opened the door with a simple push. Jamie quickly cut across the room and retrieved his dirk, hanging on the far wall.

`How did you...?' Edward began.

`Sonic screwdriver,' the Doctor replied with a grin.

'But you could have got yourselves out of here ages ago,' Stephanie said.

'Yes.' The Doctor nodded. 'But like you said, we have to set things right.' He quickly released the others from their cells. Washington, though relieved to be free, eyed the Doctor warily.

'Now that we are free, Doctor, how do you expect me to take a garrison with just the five of us?' he asked.

'If I remember my history correctly, and I usually do,' the Doctor said with a twinkle in his eye, 'you came with about twice as many men as there *are* soldiers stationed here. Now, we just quietly make our way to the holding areas for your men and release them. It shouldn't be too difficult as the Hessians will all have their feet up thanks to the information I gave them.'

'And just what information was that?' Washington whispered.

The Doctor had stepped over to the entrance to the prison now and was checking the door. It was locked. 'I told them that you went through with this hair-brained scheme without any approval from your colleagues and that the Hessians have nothing to worry about as it's Christmas. There will be no reinforcements coming and no need to worry.' He smiled mischievously. 'They were quite ready to believe you're a hot-headed idiot, you know.' Before Washington could reply, the Doctor patted him on the arm. 'Now, we will need your help in getting us out of here. There are two guards just outside.'

Jamie stepped forward, nodding to the general. 'Leave them to us, Doctor.'

Minutes later, the five were working their way across the Hessian compound. They stopped just below a water tower that doubled as a lookout post. Jamie looked upward and gestured to the Doctor. 'There's nobody there.'

`No,' the Doctor answered, grinning excitedly as his plan began coming together. 'They really have put up their feet.'

'My men are being held over there in those makeshift stockades.' Washington pointed towards an area cordoned off by a fence of bailing wire. The soldiers were desperately trying to keep warm with only the paltry fires the Hessians allowed. A handful of guards, looking unhappy at not being able to join in the celebration, walked about the holding area, scowling at their prisoners.

'Now what?' Washington asked.

' We need a diversion,' the Doctor whispered.

Edward pulled out a small, hand-held device from a zippered pocket in his left arm. 'One diversion coming up.'

The Doctor lunged forward in a desperate attempt to stop him. 'Oh, my word!

No!'

But it was too late. A beam of light lanced outward from the weapon, jutting up and cutting cleanly through the water tower. A deluge of water hurtled downwards.

'Run!' the Doctor shouted.

The five bolted across the complex, towards the holding pens, as a low rumble filled the air. The tower, weakened by the blast, came barrelling down, shattering into a multitude of pieces as it landed.

In the chaos that ensued, the few guards who were sober tried to maintain control of the situation. They were outnumbered. The Doctor slipped through and applied the sonic screwdriver to the large padlocks that held the penned revolutionaries within.

The soldiers quickly took advantage of the situation, taking the weapons from their Hessian guards and overpowering any immediate resistance that came their way.

`Forward!' Washington roared. 'Take no quarter! Let nothing stop you!'

The Doctor and Jamie quickly made their way to a small structure, out of the way of the conflict.

'Where are Edward and Stephanie?' Jamie asked.

'I don't know,' the Doctor mused, looking about the area. 'I suppose they...'

'Here we are,' Edward said, stopping the Doctor in mid-thought.

'Well, it looks as though we've set things back on track.' The Doctor sighed happily. 'The Hessians will never be able to organise

themselves to handle this large a group of men in the state they're in.' His face softened and a warm smile crossed his lips. 'It's turned out mostly as the history books remember! It's time to say goodbye.'

'Thank you for all your help, Doctor,' Edward said as he and his wife stepped back. 'I don't know how much trouble we would have been in if you hadn't come along.'

'It would have been different, wouldn't it?' said Stephanie. 'The future, I mean.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Home is always different after you've been away,' he said. 'It's the price we pay for our experiences.'

Edward was ready to press the controls on his wristwatch, but again Stephanie hesitated.

'Was it us?' she said. 'Did our being here change things? Washington was arrested, but I can't see how we can have been responsible...'

The Doctor said nothing.

'Because if we were responsible,' said Stephanie, eyes widening as realisation came, 'then Washington's plan was always meant to be defeated. And we've changed things, just to make them fit with what we remember...'

'Time travel is complicated,' said the Doctor, taking her hand. 'I wouldn't worry about it.'

She would have said something more, but he slyly clicked the button on her wristwatch, and she and her husband faded out of sight, spirited away back to their own time.

'Crazy way to travel,' the Doctor clucked as he patted Jamie on the shoulder. 'Come on, it was time we were going.'

'And everything'll be fine, will it, Doctor?' asked Jamie.

'Oh, I should think so. Washington knows what he's doing. We can leave it all to him now.'

'And was she right? Have you really changed history from what should have happened?'

The Doctor looked horrified. A little too horrified, like he was putting on an act.

`Me, Jamie?' he said. 'The very idea! I've a huge respect for history, as you well know.'

Before Jamie could respond, a cry went out that the fortress was fully in the hands of the revolutionaries. There were cheers all around, for Washington and for liberty. Soldiers emerged from one building laden with bottles of wine, which they passed out to their comrades. There was singing, and Washington barked out orders to prepare a feast.

'I guess we slip back to the TARDIS now, eh?' said Jamie gloomily.

The Doctor smiled a moment before setting a stern look. 'I'm afraid not, Jamie.

We still have one more job to do.'

Èh?' Jamie looked confused.

Àll things being equal, we must make sure that Washington and his men do not celebrate too much. They still have the battle of Princeton to win in a few days. And since it's Christmas —' his face once again broke out into a gleeful look, we might as well make merry with these good men while we're *here.'*

Òh, aye,' Jamie agreed.

With that, the two linked arms and went to join the fun.

166

The Gift

Robert Dick

An Adventure of the First Doctor,

with Susan

He was out in his boat, alone. It was just as well, really; they were arguing so often these days. So much for late-in-life marriages being happier.

Was it his fault? He had to admit that she could have a point. He was too old to be a thrill-seeker, there had been enough excitement in his

life by now. But damn it all, it was only a boat. It wasn't dangerous. Not after all the vehicles he'd tackled in his time.

Still he had won. She had bought him the boat. 'That blasted boat,' she'd called it, hardly the spirit of Christmas. Mind you, she'd kill him if she knew he was out in it already. It wasn't Christmas till tomorrow, and she'd never liked to open presents early. But she didn't have to know. He'd taken advantage of her last-minute shopping to sneak out for a while; a quick speed round the lake and back before she notic- There was something in the water. Somebody in the water?

He spun the wheel, and aimed the boat to take him in closer for a better look. It may have been a bitter day — the bleak midwinter and all that — but thankfully the waters were calm and easy to steer through. It had been the stillness of the day that had encouraged him to go out in the boat in the first place. For once, it was relaxation not excitement he had been after.

Slowing the boat, he stretched over the side and grasped at its... at her clothing.

He pulled her aboard, her body light and unprotesting. She began to retch and cough Thank God she was alive. It was cold enough on the boat, never mind in the water.

`Grandfather..; She almost choked on the word.

`Not quite, miss, though I'm certainly old enough.' He stopped. His words were wasted — she was unconscious. He sighed. It was no good, he was going to have to tell Doris he'd opened his present a day early.

General Alastair Lethbridge-Stewart (retd.) reached for his mobile phone.

Doris was clearly not happy. Having driven the girl back to the house and put her to bed, they were arguing about what to do next.

Àlastair, we have to call the authorities! She needs an ambulance, and the police will want to find out how she ended up there. She was in the middle of a lake! The middle! That's not somewhere one just ends up. Thank goodness you were there.'

`She seems to just be sleeping now. I'm sure she'll be fine.' He took her hand.

'You're not angry about me being out in the boat, then?' Her look told him any salvation was temporary, that they would discuss the matter later. 'I'll phone for a man to come and look her over —'

`You will not! You will call the emergency services and let them deal with it like anyone else would. This is not another exciting adventure for UNIT.'

Ì can have someone here more quickly than an ambulance. I want to know more about this before we hand her over to just anyone.'

Àre you so desperate for this to be something to get involved in? It's a girl in a lake. She'll have thrown herself in. Boyfriend trouble. Nothing out of this world about that. Can't you see? It's small and miserable and... human.' She stroked his chin with one finger. 'Alastair, you've retired. Again. You have to let all this go...'

She paused for breath, and the doorbell rang.

Doris went to the door and Alastair took the opportunity to reach for the phone.

He'd never been one for blindly following orders. She might be right — UNIT would never normally be interested in a girl in a lake. But something seemed *odd* about it; he could feel it. And experience had taught him to always rely on his instincts.

He was halfway through dialling the number when he heard a voice behind him.

'I believe you may have my granddaughter here.'

He turned to look at the old man silhouetted in the doorway. Check trousers.

Frock coat. White hair, far too long for his age. Well, his apparent age, that was.

He might look like he was pushing seventy, but Alastair knew he could be anything up to ten times that This was no ordinary old man. It was him.

But with a granddaughter?

He put the phone down again.

Doris was just behind the Doctor, put out that he'd just barged past her, yet too polite to actually say so. She clearly didn't know who he was. And Alastair couldn't let on that he knew himself.

`How did you know she was here?' Doris said. 'Did someone in the village see us with her?'

The Doctor glanced back at her, and Alastair saw a familiar, sly look play across unfamiliar features. 'Yes, yes, that's quite right,' the Doctor agreed. 'Someone in the village. But you do have her here? You can take me to Susan?'

He was terrified, Alastair realised. In all the world-threatening situations they had faced together, he had never seen the Doctor look so serious, or so vulnerable

— whichever face he'd been wearing.

'Of course, she's just along here.' Doris started towards the guest room *where* Susan was sleeping. 'Do you know what happened to her, Mr...'

`Doctor. Just Doctor will be fine, thank you.' He pushed past her into Susan's room, and the door closed curtly behind him.

Doris was staring at Alastair.

Àlastair?'

He didn't answer, he was trying to hear what was going on through the door.

The girl, Susan, was clearly awake. She seemed to be saying something about someone creeping up behind her. And then she started to cry. That clinched it. The two of them were definitely embroiled in something or other.

Àlastair?' Doris persisted. 'Is that really him? The Doctor?'

He put one finger to his mouth, and she bit her lip. She caught on quick, did Doris, and knew when to keep quiet. 'Yes, Doris, it's him.'

`Well, why didn't you say something, then?' she whispered. 'Why didn't he say something?'

Ì don't know this one.' Alastair could feel the old fires stirring. If the Doctor was here and he'd somehow let his granddaughter end up floating in a lake...

Well, even a former maths teacher could add up those beans. There had to be something going on. And something where they could clearly do with some help.

`What do you mean you don't know this one?'

He could see Doris was struggling. To be fair, she'd only met the Doctor when there wasn't some ruckus on, when he'd had time to charm her. She'd had it easy, had never seen what the Doctor could be like.

`We've never met, this one and me. He's from before my time.'

`But you recognised him, didn't you?'

`Well. We nearly met on one occasion. We were at the same... gathering, you could say. But we never really got the opportunity to say hello. Too many people.

Too many Doctors in fact. And, for him, that might have been after this, anyway.'

He shrugged. 'I told you he was a complicated chap to know.'

Doris shook her head. 'Well, say hello now. Alastair, this is your oldest friend.

You're not really going to ignore him, are you? He clearly needs help right now. It's what friends are for, isn't it?'

`We'll help however we can,' he said. 'But it's more complicated than that, Doris.' He wagged a finger at the closed door to the guest bedroom. 'That man in there has drummed it into my head enough times that you don't tell anyone their future. Even him. Especially him. And he's the first one. My first one was the second one. You can see why that ties everything up in knots, can't you?' It didn't matter if she understood, she just had to have faith in him. He patted her hand.

`Best to leave him alone. Just in case. Anyway, you're the one that

wants me to take things easy, leave it all behind and move on. Whatever they're up to, it's too dangerous for me to get involved. Isn't it?'

He knew there'd be a condition, that Doris would only agree if he promised her something back. They got on because she knew exactly how to manage him, in the way Fiona never had. But suddenly the door opened, and the Doctor was smiling at them serenely. Alastair wondered how much of their conversation the old man had overheard.

Ì'm sorry for any inconvenience my granddaughter and I may have caused you, especially at such an awkward time of year.'

They were sat by the fire. Alastair was conscious of the photos framed on the mantelpiece — himself as a young man in his prime, or stood with colleagues, one of them dressed in a velvet jacket rather than military uniform... one with a long scarf, grinning and pretending to salute him... Suddenly every photo seemed to have a Doctor in it. Still, he hadn't appeared to have noticed.

`How is she, Doctor?' Doris asked, coming in with a tea tray.

`Good, good,' said the Doctor agreeably. 'She's stronger than you might think.

Asleep now, of course.'

`Best thing,' said Alastair.

`Yes,' said the Doctor. 'It will speed the healing process...' He coughed and raised a handkerchief to his mouth. 'That is to say, a good night's sleep and she'll be as right as rain.'

Doris passed the Doctor his cup and gestured to the milk and sugar. 'Well, you're both welcome to stay the night. I can go and air another room for you quite easily.'

Alastair looked up sharply, but Doris only smiled back at him. He realised the Doctor was watching him too. He forced a smile. 'Quite right, Doris,' he said as effusively as he could. 'Of course you must both stay until she's well, Doctor. It's what Christmas is all about. Now, we're taking tea, you're in my house and I haven't had the decency to introduce myself. This is Doris and I'm Alastair...

Stewart.' Well, it was only a little white lie.

`You're both too kind, too kind. I shall forever be in your debt.' The Doctor sipped at his tea. For a moment, Alastair thought he might even be chuckling.

Ìt doesn't bear thinking about,' said Doris, taking a seat beside her husband.

Alastair hadn't been out in his boat and found her...'

The Doctor put his cup down carefully. His eyes were wide. 'Boat?' he said. 'I thought you'd found her washed up on the shore!'

`She was floating in the lake,' said Alastair. 'I had to pull her aboard.'

Ì must have miscalculated...' said the Doctor to himself. He seemed horrified by the very idea. Obviously he'd known Susan had been dumped in the lake — and Alastair was sure the Doctor knew who had done it — but somehow the fact she hadn't been near the shore made it worse for him. Alastair leant forward.

Ì'm sure it wasn't your fault,' he said. 'And she's safe now.'

The Doctor looked up at him. 'What?' he said. The gleam came back into his eyes. 'Oh, yes,' he said. 'Yes. You're right.' He took another sip of tea. `So, tell me about this boat of yours.'

Ì never wanted to buy him the thing in the first place,' Doris admitted. 'But he's gone on and on about it for months. And to think, if I hadn't...'

`Mmm,' said the Doctor thoughtfully.

Alastair tried to keep the conversation flowing, to stop the Doctor from dwelling on what could have happened to Susan. 'Doris feels I'm not handling retirement very well. Not enough adventure for an ex-military man...' He tailed off, realising he was steering himself back into dangerous waters. Best to keep things abstract. His whole career had been spent keeping the most remarkable secrets.

Why was it so difficult now? 'I tell her I just like to keep busy. Activity keeps you from contemplating the past, you know...'

`Yes,' said the Doctor, staring into the depths of his teacup. 'Yes, I know.'

`But it's not that!' said Doris. 'I could cope with that.' Her eyes were shining, the nearest she ever came to tears. 'He still wants to play the hero one final time. And I'm scared it will *be* final.'

Alastair, amazed, stared at her, but she wouldn't look at him. This was entirely unlike her.

The Doctor, however, was nodding. 'Now you've retired again there's no adventure any more?' He seemed to be glad to keep talking. 'At my, that is, our time 1 70

of life, I've realised that one doesn't need to look for adventure. Adventure is everywhere; it'll find you out itself. Look at poor Susan...' He harrumphed, wary of saying more about what had happened. They were all playing their cards close to their chests tonight.

Doris still wouldn't look at him, but she took her husband's hand and held on tightly. 'This is what I've been telling him,' she said. 'The army never seem to leave him alone — he's something of a specialist.'

Alastair shot her a warning glare. To no avail — it was all coming out now Ànd he loves it. So why seek cheap thrills in a boat when the real thing comes his way every now and again? He'll never retire properly. And that's fine. Honestly it is. I don't like it but I can cope with the worry. I know he makes a difference, for the better. And that's important.'

Now she looked at him, and her eyes were terrible to *see.* The sadness, the despair — he'd had no idea at all.

`But these dangerous, silly fads,' she said. 'It's ridiculous. A speed boat, at our age!'

The Doctor smiled at her reassuringly but then turned to Alastair. 'I thought you said you were an army man. Not a naval one.'

`That's why I bought it, Doctor. New challenges. New frontiers.' He couldn't resist the smile. 'You don't concur?'

`When it frightens your wife?'

Alastair again gazed into her eyes. He'd no idea she was so frightened of losing him. He'd known his UNIT life scared her, he just hadn't realised their life together did too. Why hadn't she just told him how she felt?

But she had. Of course she had. Again and again, every time they argued. He just hadn't been listening. 'It really does frighten you?' he asked quietly.

'Oh, it does.' She looked quickly again at the Doctor. 'He's over seventy. And I'm... not far behind him.'

Despite himself, Alastair smiled at the coyness over her age.

Òur adventuring days are over. And I hate the water. I've told him I'm not getting on it. But he wouldn't stop pestering me about it... And it's Christmas and I just caved in.'

The Doctor said nothing, just regarded them. Alastair could suddenly believe he really was all those hundreds of years old. He shifted uneasily in his seat. Yes, this familiar, unquiet feeling. This was the Doctor he knew.

`Doctor?' he asked, knowing his old friend had something he wasn't saying.

The Doctor fixed him with a stare. 'Sell it,' he said.

`What?'

Òr take it back. You don't need it.' He gestured at the photographs on the mantelpiece. 'You have family A grandson it would seem?'

`What are you getting at?' Alastair could feel himself getting angry. Just like the old days. Frustrated by the man's portents of doom, which — as ever — were never to be explained.

`Just sell it.' The Doctor was so firm, so challenging that suddenly Alastair couldn't stand it any more.

Ì will not!' He was too old to *be* treated like this! And this Doctor hadn't *even* met him yet! How dare he boss him about? Ì will not be challenged in my own house.' He got to his feet, but the Doctor remained sitting. Alastair loomed over him, struggling to find the words. He just felt awkward and silly. As ever.

Àlastair...' Doris began.

He waved her away. 'I'm going for a walk.'

He slammed the door on the way out. And regretted it instantly. The beautiful winter night was laid out before him. You couldn't be angry on such a night. Still, he was too proud to turn round right this minute. The walk would do him good.

Besides, he thought as he marched off down the lane, being rude to the Doctor was certainly one way to stop the old man from thinking they'd ever be friends.

Ì'm sorry about that,' said Doris. 'I think he just hates being put out to pasture.'

Àge can be a terrible burden,' said the Doctor.

`You know, don't you?'

`What ever do you mean, Mrs Stewart?' He looked her straight in the eye but was still clearly trying to bluff her. Alastair must have learned that trick from him, but Doris had learned to see through it. She kept her composure, wouldn't let him rile her like he had her husband.

`You know what I mean. You know who he is.' Her eyes dared him to deny it.

And this time she won.

Òh. That. Yes, of course I do, Mrs Lethbridge-Stewart. Your husband is my oldest, dearest friend. Do you really think it matters to someone like me if we haven't actually met yet?' He smiled gently at her, but there seemed to be something else... Was it relief? He seemed, she thought, so lonely. With his sort of lifestyle, friends — real friends — must be rare. He'd kept that hidden from her, the times they had met before. But recognising it in him, she liked him all the more. `May I ask what gave me away?'

Doris smiled back at him. `Susan. Our argument almost made you forget all about her, didn't it? For that to happen, you had to care about us as much as you do about her.'

He laughed. `Susan will be just fine, Doris — if I may call you Doris? I knew that as soon as I saw her. My people are far more resilient and... Well, I think we may have said too much already, hmm? We should probably be on our way before Alastair returns. It was really only my curiosity about the pair of you that's stopped me waking her already. I'll take her back to our ship and then tie up our unfinished business on my own.'

`You shouldn't be having adventures at your age, either,' she admonished.

`No.' The Doctor sighed. 'But, like you say, they have a habit of finding us anyway.' For a moment, a strange look came over him, like he'd given something away. In an instant it was gone. 'Could I trouble you for a little more tea?'

Doris ignored him. He'd given something away he hadn't meant to...

Something about adventures coming unbidden, something connected to what they'd been talking about... Something about Alastair? Ìt's the boat, isn't it?' she said, surprising herself with the calm of her own voice.

'

'Of course not,' said the Doctor, a little too readily.

'I thought you were worried about Susan... But if it wasn't her, it must be him.

It's the boat that scares you... Something happens to him on the boat, doesn't it?'

Her voice cracked as she spoke.

The old man put down his teacup and leant forward to her. 'My dear, if he has told you anything about me then you will know that I cannot tell you anything that has yet to happen.' A smile. 'That's one of the few things my people and **I** do agree on.'

Doris took a deep breath. She could feel the tears coming. 'But you do know, don't you? What happens to him? How he dies?'

The Doctor smiled. 'No,' he said. 'Not yet. We've never met, remember. But when he goes, I'm there for him. At the funeral, I mean, I'm there. All of me, in fact. The ones that knew him best carry him. We don't usually get on, you know.

But this time we make the effort. I think it works because we are all determined not to be the one to cause a fuss... for him.' He suddenly laughed delightedly. 'Mind you,' he continued, 'we weren't so successful at the wake. Two of us ended up almost coming to blows. I

think it started over who had had the last sausage roll and suddenly they were fighting over which of them Alastair liked best.'

Despite herself, Doris laughed through her tears. She'd only met a couple of them, but she could picture that so clearly. Then, suddenly, she stopped laughing.

There was a pause as they looked at each other.

'Am I there?' she asked.

He just turned and looked at the fire.

'I know, you can't tell me.'

It was as if he hadn't even heard her speak. He reached into his breast pocket and handed her his handkerchief. 'I'm sorry, my dear, **I** didn't mean to make you cry.'

As she dried her eyes, she said, 'Doctor, when you go, will you take the boat?

Whatever you're up to, would the boat help?' Even before he spoke, she could see in his face what the answer would be.

'I cannot make your choices for you,' he said. 'Even suggesting to you that there may be a choice to make is more than **I** should really do. Call it my gift to you... to you both, that is. We none of us know how much time we have. Even my own people... we can be wrong. Things can change.' He got unsteadily to his feet. He tapped his hands against his pockets, as if checking for something he couldn't quite recall. 'Now, if you will excuse me I must go and check on Susan...'

Doris stayed where she was, curled up on the seat, his handkerchief in her hand.

She was still there when Alastair came home, maybe an hour later. Neither of them was surprised to find the Doctor and Susan gone. They didn't even have to mention it. Nor did they mention the argument. Alastair simply sat down, took her hand in his, and they looked into the fire together.

, They were still there together when the embers died and Christmas came.

Callahuanca

Richard Salter

An Aduenture of the Fourth Doctor

It is so early that the sun has not yet begun its climb up the far side of the mountains. As I make my way through the town towards the fields, there are already signs of movement in the houses. It is just hours since Misa di Gallo ended, but nobody gets much sleep at Christmas. I hurry a little faster, knowing that I must only be away from the house for as long as it takes to fetch Santa Rosa the donkey. She is where I left her, standing in the field, chewing grass. I tie the rope about her neck and lead her from the pasture. She is not as fast as I, but can carry much, much more. I do not ride her; it is quicker if I lead. When she gets home, she will be loaded up with food and with firewood to take with us to the feast, but for now she is unladen and struggling to keep up. Poor Santa Rosa. She is three times my age and I fear she will not be with us much longer. My affection for her is why nobody questions that I should be the first to wish her feliz navidad this morning. She is the perfect excuse.

If I' m quick, I can get past Tio Carlos's house before he comes out to feed the pigs. I do not want to be seen. It's not that anybody would tell me off for visiting my pa's grave on Christmas morning, just as I promised him I would every year.

It's just that if others found out where I was going they might want to come too, and this is my time with Pa. The other kids of Callahuanca look forward to decorating the branches of the pastora with coloured paper, or dressing as shepherds and going from house to house collecting candies and receiving warm chicha and drinking cocoa. Most look forward to Epiphany, when they will wake in the morning to find their shoes filled with presents. Me? I look forward to this quiet time with my pa. I miss him.

I make it unseen to the cemetery gates and tie Santa Rosa to the iron railings.

Gently pushing open the gate, being careful not to let it squeak too loudly, I slip inside. I pull my shawl more tightly around my shoulders. It will not be hot until the sun appears over the tops of the mountains, so for now it is dusky and cold.

It is very quiet amongst the graves, and eerie, but I am not afraid. I clutch my rosary in one hand and mouth an Ave Maria as I follow the path. I reach my pa's grave. I drop to my knees and start to pray for him. I wish my pa feliz navidad and hope that he is well. I cannot stay long but in this moment I am weeping. I wish he was still alive.

There is a woman, standing beside a small tomb, watching me. She is old, her face craggy but not unkind. I stand and greet her, though to engage her in conversation would be disrespectful. She says nothing, just watches me with her mouth open. I feel unsettled. Who is she? She looks a little like my pa. Perhaps this is my grandmother, my pa's mother who left Callahuanca before I was born! She must be visiting her son. I wonder how often she comes here.

She's not alone. There is a man with her, standing next to a tall, blue tomb I've 175

never seen before. He is tall, and though his face is hard to make out beneath a floppy hat and the long, long scarf wound around his neck, it is obvious he is a gringo. Now I'm losing my nerve. He says hello to me in perfect Spanish and his voice is deep and friendly. I am already retreating.

I want to run but curiosity gets the better of me and I duck behind a gravestone and listen to them talk. I'm too far away to hear everything but I catch the man talking about repaying some debt to the old woman. I peek out from my hiding place and see the two of them enter the blue tomb. This is strange enough, but when a lamp on top begins to flash and the box disappears with the most ungodly sound, I run for my life.

I didn't tell anybody what happened because I was not supposed to be in the cemetery that morning. For the next year I did not go back. If my primos or hermanos wanted to go, I would make an excuse and stay behind. Even in daylight I was nervous to go anywhere near that end of the town by the edge of the cliff.

But now Christmas has come again and I made a promise to my pa I intend to keep. So once again, before the sun has come up, here I am pushing my way through the iron gate. I'm amazed I didn't notice the big blue tomb right away last year, but maybe it's in a different place now, somewhere more obvious. I can't remember. That whole encounter is a blur. I'm not surprised to see my grandmother and the gringo. They are at my pa's grave once again. She is kneeling and praying. The gringo wanders over to the blue tomb and disappears

inside. I half expect it to roar with noise and fade away again, but it does not.

My curiosity wins over my fear and I step forward. 'I am Ana Maria Carla Perez de Calixtro. Are you my abuela?'

She looks up from the grave and smiles warmly. Is it my imagination, or does she seem just a little younger than the last time I saw her? Perhaps it was a trick of the gloom when I first saw her last year, or perhaps it's my memory playing tricks.

Maybe she has been bathing in the mud lagoons of Chilca.

She looks like she wants to embrace me, but she holds back.

`Hello, Ana,' she says. She doesn't answer my question, but she does say, 'You coming here means I should leave. I shouldn't even be talking to you, but while el Medico is not here I can say a few words.'

Èl Medico? You are ill?'

Ì am fine. He brings me here every year to pay my respects. You see, Ana Maria, where I come from it is not possible to visit his grave.'

I don't really understand what she means by that, but her doctor has emerged from the blue tomb.

`Hello again,' he says, his voice booming and strong like I remember my pa's.

`Would you like a fruna?'

I cannot resist so I reach out and take one from a crumpled paper bag he is offering me. He has the most amazing eyes and such curly hair. Despite the sun now having emerged over the top of the mountains and the heat of the day rising, there is no sweat on his brow. And he has that long, long scarf wound around his neck! He is the most amazing, colourful man I have ever seen. Since Pa died anyway.

I realise that if the sun has risen then it will soon be time for mass. I make my apologies, thank el Medico for the fruna and take my leave. I untether Santa Maria, our new donkey now that Santa Rosa has passed on, and I feel a little uplifted from my encounter. And yet so sad that I will never see my pa again. I miss him.

I still miss him. It's been ten years since I first saw my grandmother at the cemetery, and I've been seeing her at my pa's grave every year since. Even now I'm studying at the Pontificia Universidad CatOlica del Peril, I come home often and for every Christmas. I'm studying to be an engineer, and soon I will be coming back to Callahuanca more often as I work alongside an engineer to build a reservoir and

'install pipes to bring fresh running water to people's homes. In the meantime, fetching the donkey on Christmas morning has become a tradition. I'm sure my ma has guessed why I do it, but she says nothing.

As I reach the cemetery and tether Santa Maria to a stake in the ground, I look forward to seeing my grandmother again. Once more she will be paying her respects to my pa, the gringo in the hat and scarf by her side. He never says very much, and tends to make shushing noises whenever my grandmother speaks more than a few words to me. I get the feeling she would dearly love to tell me everything, where she goes for the rest of the year and why she won't come and see the rest of the family. But she always stops herself.

To my surprise, she is nowhere to be seen. The blue tomb isn't here either.

Instead, there's the gringo, looking exactly the same as the day I first saw him. He's alone, studying the markings on each of the gravestones in turn, as if he's looking for one in particular. With a start I realise my grandmother must have passed away.

I reach out to steady myself, feeling slightly sick. She is dead and I never really knew her, never shared any time with her outside of this graveyard once a year. And she'd been looking so well, healthier every year. It's not enough! I should have stayed and to hell with the wrath of my ma when I didn't turn up to mass. I should have talked to my abuela for as long as I could, stayed all day if necessary.

The gringo sees me and rises to his feet. I expect him to be in a sombre mood but to my surprise he is wearing a grin.

`Hello,' he says, extending a hand. I shake it, uncertain. 'I'm el Medico.'

`Yes, I know,' I reply, unsure what to think.

His turn to look surprised. 'You do? How very odd.'

`Where's my grandmother?' I ask.

`Your grandmother? Your grandmother...' Another grin. 'Do you know, I have absolutely no idea.'

`But, you come here every year with her. I see you each Christmas ' He seems genuinely fascinated by what I'm saying and at the same time completely nonplussed. 'Do I? How interesting. Is it really Christmas already? My, how time flies. Tell me, is it 1958 or '59?'

Perhaps he has heat stroke. Either way, perhaps my grandmother is still alive and there was no need for me to worry. 'It's 1958. What were you looking for?'

`Hmmm? Ah, well, I'm just taking in some of the local history, looking for some peace and quiet.'

He has a faraway look in his eyes; perhaps he has lost someone too. I feel a little sorry for him, he looks so alone.

`Would you like to come and join my family for the feast?' I ask him, not really sure what I will tell everyone. Given his colour and his fine clothes, I presume he is used to eating well, so I feel compelled to add, 'We don't have much, but what we have you're welcome to share.'

He flashes those teeth at me. 'I'd be delighted!'

And then the world falls apart.

The trembling is barely noticeable at first. In seconds it is stronger, and now the Earth is shaking so violently that it's impossible to stand up.

`Run!' he yells, taking my arm and steering me towards the gates, somehow preventing me from pitching to the lurching ground. I can see Santa Maria trying to break free of her tether. She is braying desperately but I can't hear the noise over the roar. Tombstones are crashing down around me and it feels like hell is forcing its way to the surface.

A moment later the cemetery is gone, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the mountain. El Medico shoved me clear as the edge of the town collapsed and now I lie on my back, gasping for breath in the dust and sand.

Eventually the fog disperses enough for me to see that el Medico has gone. All I can hear is the townspeople screaming and shouting to each other. My first thought is for my family, but I know I cannot leave the kindly gringo. Coughing, I crawl to the new cliff edge and peer over.

There he is!

His scarf has snagged on an exposed tree root and he is clinging on for his life.

He looks in pain and there is blood on his face. His hat is gone and his fine clothing is torn and covered in dust. I tell him to hold on, as if he needs encouragement, and then scramble to my feet and call out for help. Nobody comes, they must be looking after the injured. It's up to me and Santa Maria to save el Medico.

The donkey's tether is no longer anchored to the ground, the stake trailing behind her. I lower the stake down to the stricken gringo. He grabs hold of it and hangs on while I drive Santa Maria back. She protests and struggles, but I encourage her and help pull el Medico up to level ground.

I collapse beside him, both of us panting for breath.

`Thank you,' he says. owe you my life.'

`Thank Santa Maria,' I tell him. The donkey hee-haws.

Astonishingly, he is on his feet and helping me up, seemingly unharmed despite his tattered appearance. 'We must help the townspeople,' he says. He is right, of Course.

We stumble together into the town. The damage doesn't seem as bad as I'd feared, and while sheet roofing has come down and there is dust everywhere, the buildings themselves are still intact. Most people have cuts and bruises, but el Medico seems to be in the worst shape, at least to look at.

When the work is done, my Tia Louisa invites us into her home and insists we sit down. She *seems* okay, but her son has a cut on his arm. She pours us cocoa 178

and tells me that my ma and my familia are fine, nobody has been seriously hurt and for the most part the town seems to have escaped the earthquake. I tell her of our lucky escape and avoid the question of why I was in the cemetery with a gringo in the first place.

The cemetery.

`Now I won't be able to keep my promise,' I say forlornly.

El Medico regards me curiously. 'Promise?'

Ì promised my pa before he died that every Christmas Day I would visit his grave and tell him that I love him. Now his grave doesn't exist.'

The Doctor leans in and gives me a conspiratorial smile. His eyes bulge and glint mischievously. 'Perhaps there's a way you can still keep your promise,' he suggests.

`How?'

`Well, you'll have to be patient. You won't be able to keep your promise every year. How old are you now?'

`Twenty.'

`Perhaps when you're sixty and you don't look like you do now. Can't take any chances you'll be recognised. Then I'll come and pick you up.'

`You'll pick me up in forty years?'

`Well, forty years for you.'

I have no idea what he's talking about. He's not making any sense. And then an impossible idea begins to form in my mind alongside an image of my grandmother, who I now realise may not be my grandmother after all. But how could that be?

`That's not... That's not...'

El Medico smiles. 'Trust me. I have to go now, make sure my TARDIS is still where I left her. Thank goodness I didn't park her in the cemetery! I'll see you again in forty years.'

I find myself asking, 'How will you find me?'

`Don't worry, I'm very good at finding people.'

And with that he says goodbye and leaves Callahuanca, but I know for sure, deep down: I will see him again.

179

Not in My Back Yard

Eddie Robson

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor,

with Ayfai

A figure resembling an unusually large coconut mounted atop a freakishly enormous coconut—with arms and legs added — hunched over the bar at the Black Swan in the small Norfolk village of Cheldon Bonniface, occasionally sipping a pint of cider through a straw. His name was Goilin B and, yes, he was a long way from home. Prior to arriving in Cheldon Bonniface, Goilin had been one of the most famous inhabitants of Rake, the only inhabited planet in the Actean system.

His only company in the pub was Jerry, a former full-time employee of the Swan, who was fitting in some extra shifts whilst visiting his parents over Christmas. The proprietors of the Swan, Giles and Maria Owen, had anticipated that Christmas Eve would be the busiest shift of the holidays, but festive cheer had dissipated somewhat following the evening's events. Jerry had spent the rest of the evening cleaning the bar and occasionally smoking, whilst Goilin had glowered into a succession of alcoholic drinks, making morose comments.

The hands on the clock slid vertically together. The electronic imitation of a grandfather clock's chime sounded. Jerry put down the glass he was polishing, stepped over to the stereo and hit 'play'. The chords of Slade's *Merry* Xmas Everybody rebounded around the bar at a volume intended to be audible over a pubful of drunken chatter.

Goilin groaned. 'Not this again.'

'We always have this at midnight on Christmas '

'It's a ritual?'

Jerry shrugged. 'Since I've been old enough to get served it has been.' He pulled himself a pint of bitter and chinked the glass against Goilin's. 'Merry Christmas.'

Goilin emitted a low rumble that quaked Jerry to his very soul.

'All right,' said Jerry. 'Maybe not so merry.'

Neither of them said anything for a moment. The music continued to play.

Suddenly Goilin looked up and proclaimed, 'On my home planet... I was feted for my tactical genius.'

'I know,' said Jerry.

'I was the first to command my world's combined forces. I united our armies through their sheer respect for my abilities and together we averted the imminent threat of subjugation at the hands of malevolent forces whose spread throughout the galaxy might never have been checked but for my intervention.' He stopped to drain the remaining half-pint of his cider. 'And on Earth... I am a postman.'

'You're a top-notch postman, though,' said Jerry. 'You get through that round twice as quick as old Roy. I reckon they should keep you on after Christmas.'

Goilin emitted a humourless laugh and pushed his glass across the bar to Jerry.

'Another, please.'

`Maybe you should head home, mate,' said Jerry sympathetically. 'It's a long way and you've had quite a few already.'

Goilin slapped his hand down on the bar. 'Your Earth alcohol has no effect on my Raltean constitution!' he roared, and then fell off his stool.

Thirteen hours earlier

The Doctor stepped from the TARDIS into the weak winter sunlight at the centre of the village green. He scanned Cheldon Bonniface quickly for changes since his last visit. Satisfied that there had been none at all, he clapped his hands together briskly for the sake of creating movement. It was 2017 and Britain was starting to *get proper* winters again.

On this occasion the Doctor's fellow traveller was Ayfai, a tall humanoid with a wry aspect to her features, whose suedelike light-green skin marked her out as a member of the Arldan species. Physically, she and the Doctor appeared to be the same age — in human terms, early forties — but the Doctor was a great deal older.

The Doctor was not tall, but made up for this with his energetic demeanour: he had a Roman nose and there was good humour in his

eyes. He *wore* a dark velvet jacket, white shirt and a grey silk cravat. Ayfai was not due to travel with him for long: he had broken her out of a prison on Arklus where she was awaiting execution for political dissidence. As she intended to return someday, he had not taken her out of time, but a fair distance across space, where she was unlikely ever to be found.

At least, he hoped so.

Even if she was found, he was sure he'd be able to stick his oar in and sort it out.

It seemed to Ayfai that the buildings here were extremely small and the land remarkably level. The settlement couldn't hold more than a couple of hundred people, which was possibly a good thing for her. The large accumulation of green in the landscape she found pleasing. She sniffed the air and said, `Mmm. It's quite nice.'

The Doctor wrinkled his nose. 'It's not the cleanest it's ever been, but it's...'

`Better than home. Yeah.' Ayfai also enjoyed the benefit of micro-filtration systems in the atmosphere processors the Doctor had installed in her nose and throat, allowing her to breathe Earth's air. She stepped outside the TARDIS and was alarmed at the *noise* under her feet. 'Oh. I think I've broken the ground.'

`What?' The Doctor looked down at her feet. `No, that's just frost on the grass.

It's supposed to do that.'

`What's it for?'

Ìt's not for anything. It just appears when it's cold.'

`This is cold? I'm sweltering.' In order to make Ayfai's appearance less alarming, the Doctor had given her some contemporary clothes from the TARDIS wardrobe, so she was wearing black trousers, white shirt and a black three-quarter-length coat — a man's, to accommodate her broad shoulders. She shrugged it off and handed it to the Doctor. 'I don't need this. Where can I put it?'

Òn me,' said the Doctor. 'I'm freezing.' He slipped offhis frock coat and threw 182

it into the TARDIS, then donned Ayfai's unwanted coat. He also unfastened his cravat, threw that inside the TARDIS and pulled a chequered blue scarf from his pocket. 'Sorry,' he said as he looped the scarf around his neck. 'You might have to spend your summers in Siberia.' He closed the TARDIS door and locked it.

`Where're we off to then?' asked Ayfai.

`The Centre is that way,' the Doctor said, indicating one of the roads running parallel to the green and out of the village. 'About two miles.'

`How far's that?'

The Doctor held his hands a moderate distance apart. 'Three-thousand, two-hundred and nineteen of these.'

`Y'what? Why'd you put us down so far away?'

`This is the TARDIS's favourite spot. Anyway, the walk'll help you get your bearings.'

The two of them strode to the road, then down it. Ayfai asked the Doctor to take her through the asylum application process once more. It should already be well in hand, he assured her, as he'd stopped of and filed the paperwork six months ago.

`What if it's rejected?' said Ayfai.

Ìt won't be,' said the Doctor. 'You've got a reference from me. I helped draft the Offworld Asylum Bill. It's practically all you need.'

`Practically?'

`Well, yes. Say you threatened to kill somebody in the interview, that might prejudice things a bit.'

Ì've never threatened to kill anybody in my life.'

Ìnterviews can make anyone nervous... oh,' the Doctor finished distantly as they approached the final house on this street. 'Hello!' he called out, waving to a tall, rotund figure in an ill-fitting Royal Mail uniform standing outside the front door, bending down to pick up some letters he'd dropped. `Goilin!' the Doctor shouted gleefully.

Goilin straightened up, registered the Doctor's presence and gave a small nod.

The Doctor, who had expected something more than this, bounded to the gate and down the path. `Goilin! Hoi! It's me, the Doctor!' He pointed at his own face.

`This is what I looked like last time we met, isn't it? I know I'm going a bit grey...'

Ì do remember, Doctor.' He slid the letters through the door, then turned back to the Doctor and nodded in Ayfai's direction. 'Don't tell me you've brought another.'

The Doctor glanced back at her, then back at him. 'Yes. Why?'

`Good grief. You don't know?' Goilin looked around himself. On the doorstep lay a tabloid newspaper, which he picked up and handed to the Doctor. 'See for yourself.'

The headline read: 'ALIENS GIVEN £2,000 PER WEEK TO GROW "SPACE

CABBAGE"'.

`What?' said the Doctor. 'This is December, isn't it? Not silly season?'

`Read on,' urged Goilin grimly.

Ayfai joined them and read over the Doctor's shoulder.

183

The dietary requirements of Britain's offworld settlers costs taxpayers £2,000 per immigrant EVERY WEEK, a senior civil

servant exclusively revealed to us yesterday.

Food for beings who cannot digest traditional British

vegetables and livestock is grown under controlled conditions at Government hothouses.

And the source — who does not wish to be named — says European court rulings make the Government powerless to reduce *these* costs.

This undermines the effective measures taken by Michael

Hallinan to stem the flow of alien settlers, culminating in his Commons triumph of the Bill to close Norfolk's alien 'haven' and

introduce a more rigorous system of detention nearer the capital.

This will *keep the people of* Britain *safer — but something* must *also be* done to further ease our financial burden.

Otherwise hardworking families will in future years be sitting down to a drastically reduced Christmas dinner, whilst aliens feast on exotic produce at their expense.

A bewildered Doctor asked Goilin how the closure of the Centre had come about.

Ìt's what people want,' Goilin said, tapping the newspaper. 'Or so they say. This isn't the worst there's been. Last week: aliens stealing people's jobs. The week before: aliens marrying people's children. The week before that: aliens showing disrespect for the Royal Family. There are stories like this every day.'

`Well, you'd know, wouldn't you?' came a voice from above their heads.

The Doctor, Goilin and Ayfai looked up and saw *a* middle-aged woman leaning out of her window to address them.

Èxcuse me, Mrs Badham?' asked Goilin.

`You've been reading my paper every day for weeks,' Mrs Badham asserted. 'I seen you.'

Ì merely scan the front page. I didn't realise it diminished your enjoyment of it.'

`You haven't been at my letters, have you?'

`Certainly not!'

Ì've heard about your sort. Using our personal information to sell us out to other countries.'

Ì am not interested in any of your personal information, Mrs Badham.'

`Well, you can clear offmy doorstep, then. You and your friend and the kiwi-fruit woman.'

`What's a kiwi fruit?' said Ayfai as Goilin ushered her and the Doctor away.

The Doctor had borrowed Goilin's mobile telephone and was now talking on it as the three of them walked to the Centre, which was located at a former RAF base.

The route took them through neatly quartered green and yellow fields, which politely refrained from obstructing one's view of the horizon. The whole place had the air of being terribly polite. It was just a shame that the only resident Ayfai had met so far had inaccurately compared her to an exotic foodstuff.

184

The Doctor was speaking to one of his oldest friends, although, like the Doctor himself, he looked younger than he was. He was fast approaching his ninetieth birthday, but owing to an incident in this very village almost eight years ago, he appeared to be — and medically was — in his early forties.

Ìf there was anything else I could do, Doctor,' General Sir Alastair Lethbridge-Stewart insisted from the other end of the telephone, 'don't you think I'd have done it by now?'

`Don't you have any influence?' the Doctor asked.

`Not as much as I did. People have short memories, Doctor, especially during a recession.' Lethbridge-Stewart had once been considered the authority on alien matters, but recently questions had been asked about his rejuvenation and his public standing had diminished.

`Recession?' This wasn't how the Doctor had seen things going when he'd last been here. He was starting to become aware of a degree of instability in this time period in particular: perhaps it was his own frequent interference in it, changing it slightly every time he arrived. 'Does this have anything to do with Hallinan getting into Number Ten?'

`He's been in office six months and he's been able to do more or less as he likes.

The economy took a dive when the environmental protocols came in.'

`Well, it's their own fault,' the Doctor said, almost shouting. 'I told them to do **that** thirty years ago.'

`Preaching to the converted, Doctor,' said Lethbridge-Stewart, trying

to hold his friend back from a lengthy polemic. Most world governments had been pitifully slow to implement 'clean-up' restrictions on industry, only responding when **a series of dramatic environmental disasters had made it impossible to ignore the** problem. Some businesses had been smart enough to adjust ahead of time, but most had struggled to balance the books now that environmental corner-cutting invited such harsh penalties. Although the problem was very much society's own fault, it had characteristically looked for somebody else to blame. Hard times had unfortunately coincided with the first officially acknowledged alien settlers and **Hallinan had found that, if he placed the two things side by side, plenty of people were willing** to make the connection for themselves.

Ì see,' the Doctor said when Lethbridge-Stewart explained this, and thought for a few moments. 'Look, Alastair, how does Christmas in Norfolk sound to you?

Don't you and Doris still owe me for Christmas in '95?'

'We do?'

Ìs Doris there with you?'

`Yes. Want a word?'

`No, but you owe me.'

I Goilin and Ayfai walked just behind the Doctor, and Goilin made a mental note to ask the Doctor for some money to cover the bill. Ayfai had been talking to Goilin **about the circumstances under which she had met the Doctor and the straitjacketed** society in which she'd lived.

Goilin growled. 'I fought a war for my people. I won a war for my people. And 185

when I returned, a new administration betrayed me and put me into exile on Earth, and do you know why?' His voice rose towards the end of the sentence, causing Ayfai to shy away slightly.

'Er. No,' she said.

'They put me into exile because I was a threat to them, and they discredited me and put me out of the way. And they put me here, because...' The second part he found difficult to say. 'Because they knew how much I would hate being in a place where nobody has heard of me!'

The Offworld Asylum and Settlement Centre was always referred to as just 'the Centre' by locals, because they still felt silly talking about aliens. A collection of squat, utilitarian buildings, it was poorly lit and had not aged well, but the cultural clash within had always made it an exciting place. Many of those whose applications had been accepted stayed on as residents whilst they became accustomed to the new world, or whilst they tried to get enough money together to acquire their own homes. Few had managed this since the recession hit.

Reports of illegal aliens working for half-minimum wage filled the papers.

There were few human visitors to the Centre these days: the children's drawings of the complex's 'monsters', proudly pinned to noticeboards in the communal areas, were faded. Rather than banding together against the increasingly threatening outside world, many of the inhabitants had withdrawn into like groups. Reptilians waddled irritably across the quadrangle. Sentient dust clouds, steeped in melancholy, rolled through the corridors. Everybody kept themselves to themselves.

The Doctor and Ayfai made themselves as comfortable as possible in a small side office with marked walls and old, cheap, wooden furniture. A couple of not entirely pleasant phone calls to the authorities made the Doctor aware that he was no longer considered a cast-iron referee. Ayfai's asylum application had been suspended and she was due to report to the new secure facility with all the others whose applications were pending. Those who had been approved, but were still resident at the centre — like Goilin — were to be made homeless. This was all due to happen in mid-January.

The Doctor assured Ayfai that, if he couldn't rescue the situation, he'd take her somewhere else.

Ayfai nodded. 'What about everybody else, though? Why don't you take them away too?'

The Doctor sighed. 'Because that would be giving in. That's what the

people who're closing this place down want. If they decide not to let people in, they can't just put them on a boat back home and I don't want to make it easier for them. I'll work on it after Christmas, we won't be able to get anything done until next week.'

He made the effort to brighten. 'Now, I came here to spend Christmas with friends. Some of whom haven't ever had a Christmas before. And Christmas brings communities together. Like in It's a *Wonderful* Life.'

The Doctor spent the rest of the afternoon convincing the Centre's inhabitants to 186

join the traditional sequence of events on Christmas Eve in Cheldon Bonniface: first the pub, then on to St Christopher's Church. According to the Doctor's friends, the Black Swan had become the favoured establishment of the alien-friendly inhabitants of Cheldon Bonniface, by no means a tiny minority.

The aliens arrived at the Swan in the early evening, having nothing better to do, and for a time the atmosphere was uneasy, with the Doctor spending almost an hour glancing at the door every few seconds. This was finally broken by Ishtar Hutchings and her parents, Emily and Peter, who apologised for not arriving earlier — Ishtar had had trouble finding someone to look after her daughter, Jasmine. Almost immediately afterwards the Reverend Annie Trelaw arrived, followed by other friends and acquaintances of the Doctor: Lord Tasham, who had led the attempt to block the Centre's closure in the Lords; Carrie O'Grady, from the cafe, and Peter Cooke, the baker; dressmakers Miss Gjovaag and Miss Kusinitz; and Mrs Higgins, proprietor of the local guest house, who told the Doctor that a room had been prepared for him and his companion this evening.

The Doctor had originally hoped to cast his net wider. He'd planned to invite Bernice and Jason, as they'd been married here, and thought they might like to have some sort of ceremony to mark their reconciliation. He'd hoped to see Ace again too: maybe even Grace. He could even have cheated, and picked up his other, former companions...

But he'd discarded those plans upon realising the predicament of Cheldon Bonniface's alien contingent. The village had once seemed so proud of its quirky status as home to the most concentrated alien population on Earth, but somewhere along the line, a dislike for the unlike had taken hold. That was why, for tonight's purposes, he needed to concentrate on bringing the community together, not

dragging in more outsiders. It wasn't the special Christmas he'd been planning: perhaps he could go forward and do that in 2018 instead... But he had things to do, important things, and he couldn't put them off forever.

`Hiya,' said Ishtar's voice at his shoulder.

Alarmingly self-possessed as a teenager, Ish was now 28 and projected a sense of vague irritation that the world was not yet at her feet. The Doctor was enormously fond of her but also a little scared, and slightly guilty: it was he, after all, who years ago had imprisoned a malevolent godlike being in her infant brain and been offhandedly confident that she wouldn't do anything silly— like, say, turn evil — as a result. Over the years, Ish had gradually learned to access a tiny fraction of her captive's power, which made her one of the most powerful humans in existence.

Ishtar was oblivious to the Doctor's concerns. There was a reason why she had come directly to him upon entering the Swan, and it had everything to do with the fact that although she was not short of suitors — her sublime confidence, lissom figure and cascade of natural auburn hair made sure of that — she was easily bored by them. Yet the last time she had seen the Doctor — the first time she'd met his current incarnation — they had talked until dawn.

The Doctor grinned at her and her own smile amplified in return.

Àwful business, isn't it?' she said, jabbing a thumb at the assembled aliens.

The Doctor nodded.

Ì only wish I'd got the seat instead of our "friend", Grayson.'

`You stood?'

Ishtar nodded. 'It was exciting. Thought I'd finally found something I wanted to do.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'You're still young.'

Ì' m not that young,' she protested good-naturedly.

Lethbridge-Stewart and his wife Doris stepped into the pub just before

eight o'clock and received a warm reception, not least from the Doctor, who jumped up and embraced first Doris and then Alastair. He reacted awkwardly but appreciated the sentiment. His way of returning it was to offer to buy the Doctor a drink.

The Doctor was pleased. The atmosphere was warming nicely.

Until tonight, Richard Grayson MP hadn't really been able to enjoy his triumph.

He'd had business to attend to in London since the beginning of December and had gone for a city break to do his Christmas shopping as soon as Parliament had gone into recess. He'd returned to his home three miles outside Cheldon Bonniface late last night and let it be known that he would be enjoying a drink in the Time In A Bottle on Christmas Eve. By the time he arrived, the pub was almost too full for him and his wife to enter, but the crowd stepped back for him and burst into cheers and applause and even some singing, and they all wanted to shake him by the hand. This was because they represented the half of Cheldon Bonniface that wanted the aliens moved elsewhere, and Grayson was their champion. Grayson took full credit for the Bill which had achieved this, even though it had been drafted by dozens of hands, and had been promised good things from the next Cabinet reshuffle.

As he stood at the bar and boasted to Kelly Moore from the local newspaper about how he'd managed to swing the vote, dimly trying to remember not to say anything that might get back to the wrong people, Phillip Galt, the Council member for Cheldon Bonniface, stepped in from outside and clapped Grayson on the shoulder.

`They're coming to the service,' Galt gasped.

`Who's coming to what service?' asked Grayson.

Àliens. To the church.'

`That's a disgrace,' said Grayson. He made a series of brutally disparaging remarks about Annie Trelaw. Then he remembered himself, turned to Miss Moore and said, 'Those are strictly off the record.'

Miss Moore raised an eyebrow.

Grayson realised that he might need to give her another, better, story.

The Doctor arrived at St Christopher's early and spoke to the church's spirit, Saul.

Saul had been there so long, and had spent so much of that time being passive, that he sometimes found it difficult to view certain events as significant, so the Doctor thought it worth emphasising how much he needed Saul's help.

188

`Just do what you can to hold things together,' the Doctor said. 'If we can just bring the village back together, just for a while...'

`Hmm,' said Saul sceptically.

`Yes, I know it sounds painfully naive. But can you please try?'

'I will,' Saul said. 'These last few months have been difficult.'

'So I've heard,' the Doctor said. 'I wish I could've been here. Although I've always been rather better at dealing with tyrants and despots and so on...'

The Doctor lit a candle and spent the rest of the time until the service meditating on it, helping Saul to gather strength.

So it was that when the villagers walked under the threshold, they were filled with a sense of delight and satisfaction that they'd come — even those who felt that the evening's service was a kind of sacrilege — and the various aliens allowed their predicament to recede in their minds, and focused on what was good about this obscure little planet and why they wanted to live here. Annie emerged from the vestry as they were taking their seats, caught the Doctor's eye and made a theatrical show of nervousness.

`When should I start?' Annie asked.

`Whenever you like,' the Doctor said.

Annie took a deep breath, and began. 'It's good to —'

She was cut off by a roar from outside the church. The Doctor stood and dashed towards the entrance.

Goilin B was in the act ofbeating up Philip Galt on the green. Goil in's words, which included such yells as 'You snivelling insignificant!' and 'I could destroy you at any moment!' were being recorded for posterity

on Kelly Moore's Dictaphone: she had been grabbing a few words with Lethbridge-Stewart on their way to the service.

They should have already been inside the church by now, but ironically Lethbridge-Stewart had been so engaging in his efforts to explain that levels of crime from the alien community were lower than the national average, that she had been still outside and on hand when the fracas erupted. Her camera was already sending pictures of the event directly to her email account. Consumed with rage, or perhaps Just not fully appreciating what was going on around him, Goilin did not temper his behaviour even slightly. He simply kept on shouting and slapping his victim.

The Doctor, on the verge of hysteria, intervened.

`What do you think you're *doing?'* he demanded.

'He —' said Goilin, not noticing Galt crawling rapidly from under him as he looked up. 'He claimed that I'd stolen something called a "gift voucher" from his

!postal delivery.'

t had, of course, gone much deeper than that. At the behest of Grayson, Galt had deliberately provoked Goilin with other slurs on his honour, although Galt had erroneously banked on being able to run from the lumbering creature after taking punch or two. So much for the tactical nous of Mr Galt. But his goal was achieved, as Moore had seen only the extremely one-sided fight and not what had **led** to it.

The Doctor launched a succinct tirade at Goilin, then encouraged Moore to continue to the church and *cover* the service. But he could see what was running through her mind: which of the national papers to offer her story to first. It would be the Boxing Day front page. This bit of community bonding he'd arranged had been his last throw of the dice and the dice had flown out of the cup, over his shoulder and out of the window. He sang along at the service but he knew it was over. The story was already spreading amongst the people, becoming exaggerated, feeding upon itself.

Goilin sloped back to the Black Swan.

Nobody else came.

The Doctor could have just left in the TARDIS, but he'd come for a Christmas and he was going to have one, even if it was a miserable one sulking in front of the television. He turned on the set in his room at Mrs Higgins's guest house at half past midnight and discovered that Gone With the Wind was about to start.

An hour and a half into the film, someone knocked on his door. The Doctor didn't answer, but the knocking persisted and became so loud that he could no longer hear the dialogue, so he got up and unlocked the door. Ayfai had heard the television from her room. The Doctor sat down on the bed and she sat next to him, and they both stared at the screen throughout their conversation.

`That didn't really go well, did it?' she said.

Ì'll find somewhere else to take you,' he replied.

`What about where you come from?'

`No. No, no, no. Definitely not there.'

Silence, except for the television.

Ì'm sorry,' the Doctor continued, 'I can't find a place for you here.'

`Don't worry,' said Ayfai. 'Doesn't seem that great anyway.'

Òh, but it is!' the Doctor said. 'It's a rich, complex... sometimes aggressive and destructive, but it makes up for that... Oh, I wish I couldshow you.' He glanced out of the window. 'Actually, I wish they'd show you themselves.'

He'd really wanted this to be a visit from which he could take away some good memories, but instead he felt upset, disillusioned and inadequate, having failed to resolve the situation or even improve upon it in any way. And all this had happened in front of a guest. He felt like he'd brought a new partner home to meet his family, only for the family to spend the entire evening being obnoxious.

They continued to watch the television for another hour or so, the Doctor explaining the basic principle behind cinema, taking solace in the essential unimportance of the discussion. He was therefore briefly irritated when the film was suddenly compressed into a *corner* of the screen, the remainder of the screen being filled with a special news report from the ITN newsdesk. As Gone With the Wind continued to run silently in the corner, live pictures showed a couple of large alien

spacecraft drifting over the skies of London, white lights scanning the landscape below.

The Doctor sat bolt upright, scrambled for the remote control and switched over to watch it on the BBC, where he knew the coverage would be better.

* * *

19 0

When the first of the spaceships had appeared over London a few minutes ago, sleepless children had gazed excitedly from their windows in the belief that what they could see in the distance was Santa Claus, progressing across the sky on his sleigh. However, the ships bore no gifts, and they planned to leave Earth with a good deal more than just some mince pies and a few glasses of sherry.

And it wasn't only over London. It quickly became apparent that there were upwards of a hundred of these ships dispersed around the world. In some areas they had interrupted Christmas Eve; in others they had broken in on Christmas morning; in others they had caused people to leave the table whilst Christmas dinners went cold. In places which did not celebrate Christmas, fear and confusion interrupted the monotony of an ordinary day. All over the world, people looked to the skies, or turned on their television sets, to witness the spaceships that were carrying out an unsubtle programme of reconnaissance.

`The Chelbil aren't an especially subtle race,' the Doctor explained to Ayfai as they strode out from the guest house.

`The who?' asked Ayfai.

`Chelbil. A rogue race of droids. A minor irritant in intergalactic terms because their programming's quite limited, but they can probably knock over a planet like this by the time of the King's Speech. They'll take anything they can eat, use as a weapon or that just looks nice and shiny.'

`So where are we going?'

`First we need to draw one of those craft to us. I can do that with my ship.' He pointed at the TARDIS, coming into their view on the village green.

Suddenly, the TARDIS was bathed in white light. The Doctor and Ayfai looked to the source.

`That was quick,' Ayfai shouted over the whirring of the Chelbil craft, which hovered no more than a few dozen yards above their heads.

`That wasn't me,' the Doctor replied. 'They've homed in on the TARDIS of their own accord. I had a plan, but it involved them not getting here quite so fast.'

`What do you think they want with it?'

Ìf I' m lucky they've just realised how advanced it is and want to steal it. If I'm unlucky they see it as a threat and want to destroy it and its operator.'

Ìn that case, hadn't we better get away from it?'

The Doctor was caught in two minds: he could dodge back and try to carry out his plan anyway, or he could abandon the plan altogether and try to save the TARDIS. And every moment he hesitated made both options less likely to work.

He made his decision.

But before his limbs had a chance to respond, his view of the craft started to ripple and he paused, distracted. The light that shone down on the TARDIS

became more diffuse. Also, the air suddenly felt like a mild evening in spring. A couple of speculative energy bolts shot from the craft in the direction of the TARDIS, reached the point where the air was disrupted and dissipated.

`Heat barrier?' the Doctor muttered.

`Doctor?' said Ayfai. 'I think somebody's trying to get your attention.' She 191

pointed towards the Black Swan, outside which Ishtar was standing. One arm was outstretched towards the craft, the other was waving frantically in the direction of the Doctor and Ayfai. They ran to her as she took a seat at one of the pub's outside tables, keeping her arm rigid all the while.

`Doctor,' Ishtar said. 'I was coming to find you. I was watching Gone

With the Wind and —'

`Yes,' the Doctor said, `so were we.'

`How does it end?'

'"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."'

`Well, maybe not, but I do.'

The Doctor waved an arm at her. No time for comedy.' He pointed at the heat barrier. 'Is that you doing that?'

Ì' m not holding my arm out like this for fun, Doctor.'

'Do you actually need to hold your arm out?' asked Ayfai.

Ìt seems to help,' said Ishtar.

`Where did you learn to do that?' the Doctor asked, giving her a hard stare.

Ishtar bit her lip. 'Taught myself.'

'We'll talk about this later. What else can you do?'

`Right *now?* This is pretty much it.'

The Doctor realised that the nature of the energy upon which Ishtar drew wasn't clear even to her, and that she didn't know how much of it was hers to use. 'How long can you keep it up for?'

`No idea.'

`Right, then I've got to get to the Centre asap and get hold of Goilin.'

Òh, you don't have to go to the Centre to do that.'

`Why not?'

`He's under this bench.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed and he dropped to the floor. Indeed, Goilin was snoozing underneath, oblivious to the crisis unfolding above him. Enlisting Ayfai's assistance, the Doctor pulled the Raltean out. (In fact, Ayfai was stronger than the Doctor and did most of the work.) Once shaken awake, Goilin instinctively attempted to attack

them both, but then he saw the Chelbil vessel overhead.

`What's that?' he growled, trying to focus on the craft.

`Chelbil scavenger fleet,' the Doctor explained.

`Ha!' snorted Goilin, then winced as he realised that *he* was entering that uncomfortable zone of near sobriety. 'You say that like there's any other kind of Chelbil fleet. What am I doing under a bench?'

`We assumed you'd know. We pulled you out because we need you to talk to them for us.'

Ì'd rather shoot at them.'

`Well, the idea behind this plan is that it gets around our complete lack of weaponry.'

`What's going on?' shouted a voice from inside the pub. It was Giles Owen, the landlord, leaning out of an upper-storey window.

`Good morning!' the Doctor said. Do you have any kind of video camera?'

'I did, but it's broken.'

Òh.'

Maria Owen peered over her husband's shoulder. 'Is it very important?' she asked.

Ìt is, rather,' the Doctor replied.

Òh. Well...' She vanished from view and emerged from the front door a minute later, pulling a dressing gown around herself and bearing a small gift-wrapped box. 'Here,' she said, offering it to the Doctor. 'I got him a new one. It was going to be a surprise. Is it all right?'

The Doctor unwrapped the box and grinned at the sight of the contents. 'It's ideal. Thank you.' He kissed her quickly on the forehead and ran to the TARDIS.

Try to sober him up!' he called to Ayfai over his shoulder.

The Doctor returned a few minutes later, clutching something he'd

wrenched from the workings of the TARDIS and a coil of wire that led back to his ship and inside the doors. As he sprinted towards them, the coil unfurled, whipping out from his arms in short lengths. He spoke rapidly as he neared.

Ì've linked the camera to the TARDIS's distress signal transmitter and kept it linked to the TARDIS's power reserves so the Chelbil ship up there should hear you —' he pointed at Goilin, who was propped up against the table next to Ishtar's feet, when you tell them to leave or face the consequences.'

`Why are you limping?' asked Ayfai.

The Doctor scowled. 'I slipped on my cravat.' He put down the equipment and rubbed his leg.

`What are the consequences?' asked Ishtar.

`We destroy them utterly,' explained Goilin.

'Er...' said the Doctor, extending the camera's tripod and positioning it opposite Goilin. 'That's what we want them to think. If everybody on Earth worked together they might be able to see the Chelbil off, but that'd involve them all working together and I wouldn't like to bank on that happening. So what I want you to say is...'

The interior of the Chelbil craft was completely dark, because the Chelbil all knew exactly what was around them and didn't need to see in order to be able to negotiate the layout. Information streamed up, down and around the craft at incomprehensible speed as the Chelbil shared it with each other: interpreting it took much longer as their intelligence was limited, but they were methodical.

They shared their interpretations, rejected what seemed incorrect, and eventually developed their strategy.

Suddenly every one of them straightened up. An image of the face of Goilin B

was being beamed to the craft: the communications team, recognising its importance, sent it to everybody. They recognised its importance because they recognised the face. Of course they did.

`This is Grand Overbear Goilin B of the planet Ralte,' the message said

unnecessarily. 'I address the entire Chelbil fleet. Since my well-publicised exile I have settled on this world. I have proved my military prowess to its people and they have made me their ruler that I might lead them to the glory that has hitherto eluded them. Leave now or become the first victims of my new regime. Message ends.'

The Chelbil started to discuss the matter.

The Doctor switched off the video camera and made an 'okay' sign to Goilin.

Ayfai had her eyes fixed on the Chelbil craft. 'They're not budging.'

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder at it. 'Give them a chance to talk about it.

Do you think we should offer them some nibbles?'

Ishtar tried not to let the strain show, although she certainly felt it. 'Tell them they *can* go away and *sleep* on it if they like.'

The Chelbil had already been perturbed by the heat barrier that had prevented them from looting the alien machine: nothing with this sort of power had figured in their advance survey, yet it seemed to be emanating from one of the natives.

Now, the appearance of Goilin B was causing a radical rethink of the strategy. The broadcast was sent from one Chelbil craft to another, and as one they worked on the problem. Other Chelbil fleets had crossed paths with Goilin a couple of times before and the advice from those encounters was never to do so again.

They didn't take what Goilin had said entirely at face value. But even so, they made all their decisions based upon percentages and this decision was no different.

As one, the Chelbil ships lifted themselves out of Earth's atmosphere and went to find easier pickings elsewhere.

Outside the Black Swan, the Doctor gazed up at the departing craft and grinned.

'Is that it?' asked Ishtar. 'Have we done it?'

Ì think so,' said the Doctor. 'I think we have.'

Ishtar lowered her heat barrier. Ayfai breathed a sigh of relief. Goilin

went off into the bushes to throw up.

The Doctor heard footsteps approaching from the direction of the guest house and turned to see Lethbridge-Stewart, hastily dressed in a green pullover and trousers, dashing towards them.

`Doctor,' he said when he arrived at his friend's side. 'What's the situation?'

Òh,' said the Doctor. 'Sorry, I didn't think to come and get you. We're done.'

'What?' Lethbridge-Stewart looked affronted. 'You saw off an invasion without me?'

`Sorry.' The Doctor laughed. 'I seem to be wrapping things up more quickly these days. Next time, I promise.'

Television cameras arrived in the village with the dawn, to help the world's population in their efforts to work out what was happening, or more accurately coming to terms with the fact that it had already happened and everything was, in 194

fact, fine. Many had slept through it entirely and felt a little cheated at having missed it.

Lethbridge-Stewart was on hand to explain that Goilin's message to the Chelbil craft was not true — some local television sets had picked up the Doctor's broadcast — and assured everybody the rotund, hirsute alien had not taken over the world. Goilin humbly — by his standards — explained the bluff and why it had worked. People seemed quite impressed by him, not least the inhabitants of Cheldon Bonniface, who had suddenly realised that his presence meant that the village would be automatically safe from most of the galaxy's aggressors. The majority opinion moved firmly in favour of keeping him, and to the Doctor's delight, Goilin agreed to this only if the Centre's other inhabitants were allowed to stay. He behaved quite immaculately, now that the attention was on him. 'I don't expect any great reward,' he told the cameras. 'There is honour enough in working for the postal service...'

Kelly Moore had an even better story to sell. She deleted her photographs and audio of the previous evening's incident.

Ayfai was talking about staying, trying to become a citizen, maybe even going into politics.

Richard Grayson decided to quit whilst he was ahead.

People were outdoors. They mingled with their visitors. The Doctor, sitting on the wall outside St Christopher's, mused aloud that it was a most unusual Christmas.

`Yes,' said a voice from behind him. The Doctor turned to see a small, dark-haired man in a white suit, leaning on an umbrella with a question-mark handle.

This, too, was the Doctor: the man he had been before he'd become the man he was now.

Òh,' said the Doctor, mildly surprised. 'You. Hello.'

`You know,' said the other Doctor, 'it won't be as simple as this. Getting them to work together, I mean.'

No. They'll need time. But it's a start.'

Ì do apologise for my timing, by the way. The Chelbil fleet was supposed to arrive yesterday afternoon.'

The Doctor knitted his brows. 'You...?'

`Yes,' said the other Doctor, 'me, and, no, you won't remember. You're such a good improviser, I didn't want to let you know too much about it in advance.'

The Doctor groaned. His previous incarnation was particularly fond of crossing his own timeline, setting things up for himself, micro-manipulating events, often to the irritation of his other selves. 'There's no need to prove to me how clever you are...'

But the other Doctor couldn't resist. 'I saw the Chelbil coming and trapped them in a fold of hyperspace,' he said, grinning. 'Then I set them free, right on course for our friend there to have his moment of glory.'

The Doctor gave his earlier self a less-than-sincere round of applause.

`What's wrong?' asked the other Doctor.

The Doctor sighed. 'I came, I saw, I helped. But now... I think I have to go.'

The other Doctor stepped closer. 'Yes. I suppose you do.'

Ì' m grateful for your help, really. You know that, don't you? Actually, at the moment I wish you could help more...'

The other Doctor smiled and shook his head.

Ìt hasn't been easy for us, has it?'

`No. I think that's true. But I think we've done quite well.' The other Doctor tapped his successor on the shoulder with his umbrella. 'Stay for today. I think you've earned it.'

The Doctor smiled, nodded and, without looking back, started to walk towards the village green, the frost crunching under his feet. There was a party in the village, and everyone was welcome.

She Won't Be Home

Joseph Lidster

An Aduenture of the Sixth Doctor

And the bells rang out across the city, as Londoners welcomed yet another Christmas Day...

Àlways just me,' groaned Linda Grainger as she sat down on the pavement.

`Happy Christmas '

And the bells rang out across the space station, as Festulasions welcomed yet another Celebration Day...

Àlways just me,' muttered the Doctor as he stirred his drink. 'In the *end,* it's always just me.'

Earlier, in the White Rabbit pub...

Òkay, okay, okay! What links the hostages in Iraq and the lovely Linda Grainger?'

shouted Chrissy Chambers, sloshing her Malibu and Coke across the table.

`They were all freed in time for Christmas!' chorused the other girls surrounding her.

Linda pulled a face and sipped her drink. 'Ha ha,' she said. 'Very funny.'

Òh, come on,' shouted wotserface. The Chinese one from accounts. 'Who wants to be stuck with a bloke at this time of year?'

Linda looked across the pub, grimacing as the unholy sound of Vanilla Ice rippled across the crowd. She struggled not to fall off the stool as her workmates cackled and shrieked and knocked back their drinks. Actually, she thought, she would've been quite happy to have been stuck with a bloke at this time ofyear. And she would have been too, had Jimmy not given her the old, 'It's not you, it's me...'

speech. And a merry Christmas to you too, mate.

A voice shouted into her ear. 'Cheer up!' It was Chrissy. **And** she was dangling a sprig of plastic mistletoe. 'With this, you can have any fella!'

`Yeah,' said Linda, forcing a smile. 'Yeah, you're right.'

`That's it, girl.' Chrissy was clearly struggling to focus. 'The world's your...'

Suddenly, she cut off as a group of men dressed identically in black suits and sunglasses swaggered into the pub.

`The Righteous Brothers!' she cheered.

`Girls! The wise men are here!' shouted one of the men, punching his fists into the air. 'And we bring some very special gifts!'

Chrissy and the others jumped up and staggered over to them, leaving Linda alone.

She looked down at her drink and, the sound of the music and people blurring **almost** into silence, she carefully considered her options. Then, leaning her head back, she chucked the cocktail down her throat and headed towards the bar.

* * *

Earlier, in a corridor...

The TARDIS materialised and out stepped the Doctor. His face was unusually grey.

He paused and sniffed the air.

Àh, Igo,' he muttered. He tilted his head to one side and listened to the sound of distant cheering. 'And, if I'm not mistaken, that would be the sound of a thousand Festulasions expressing their joy at the imminent arrival of another Celebration Day.'

More slowly than usual, he began to walk down the corridor. 'Oh, well,' he said, trying to banish thoughts of *her* from his mind. 'At least I won't be lonely.'

`You all right, love?' shouted the barman.

Linda looked up and, for the briefest of moments, considered telling him the truth. Am I all right? Actually, no, I'm not. I'm stuck here with my so-called mates instead of at home with my family. I've just been dumped by my boyfriend. My job sucks and my new hair makes me look more like Edward Scissorhands than Julia Roberts. So am I all right? No, in fact I'd go as far as saying this is the worst Christmas in my entire life.

`Yeah, I'm fine,' she said. Suddenly, the mood in the pub changed as someone put Cliff Richard on the jukebox. As he began to warble about opening your eyes, the crowd jeered. Linda ordered yet another drink and began to idly pick at a bowl of bar snacks.

`Greetings, oh multicoloured one!' trilled the robotic barman. 'And how are you on this fine Celebration day?'

The Doctor looked up and, for the briefest of moments, considered telling it the truth. How am I? Well, she's gone. Another one, just gone. Another one who hadn't realised how important they'd been to him. My life is just an endless stream of brief visits to places and times with nowhere to ever call home. Today hurts more than I can possibly say. No, in fact I'd go as far as saying that this is the most utterly depressing day of my life.

`Me? Oh, I'm fine,' he said. Suddenly, the mood across the space station changed as someone put Cliff Richard on the jukebox. As he warbled about going on his summer holidays, the crowd jeered. The Doctor ordered another drink and began to idly pick at a bowl of bar

snacks.

Linda knocked back a Taboo and lemonade and her eyes began to search the bar for a replacement. A replacement for him.

The Doctor knocked back a Cristofferlan Cacklemeister and his eyes began to search the bar for a replacement. A replacement for her.

And the music and the crowds became an indistinct blur as they searched for the next best thing to happen to them. Because, they thought, nobody wants to be alone at this time of year. But the happy crowds, singing and dancing and kissing, ignored them.

* * *

198

`More peanuts?' asked the barman.

Linda looked up and considered the bar snack. `Yeah.'

`More toes?' asked the barman.

The Doctor looked up and considered the bar snack. 'Yeah.'

Then he paused. 'What?' He looked at what he was holding.

`Would my technicoloured friend like a fresh bowl of toes?'

And the Doctor examined what he had been about to nibble. A chunk of white bone, encased in pale pink skin with what appeared to be a toenail grafted on to one end. A toenail painted with, if he wasn't mistaken, Kimmel No. 5.

And, suddenly feeling her stomach contents lurch up towards her throat, Linda turned and began to push her way through the leering mass of people.

And suddenly the Doctor jumped up over the bar, advancing towards the robot.

`What's going on? Are these human toes?'

The barman burbled but didn't answer.

`Well?' shouted the Doctor. Then he saw the window.

`Yes, sir,' trilled the robot, as the Doctor looked out into space. 'They're very popular at this time of year.'

The cold night air bit into Linda, causing her to panic. She'd felt alone all night but this was worse. Now, she was really alone. She staggered over to the edge of the pavement and flung herself down. She wrapped her arms around her knees and shivered as she looked up at the stars.

Oh, no, she thought, I think I'm going to cry. And all because of a bloke.

Then she noticed that one of the stars seemed brighter than the others...

The Doctor, his hands pressed up against the glass, looked through the viewscreen and down at the small, defenceless blue world below.

He sighed. 'Don't worry, the Doctor's on his way.'

And Linda looked up at the bright star and, despite the tears that were starting to run down her cheeks, she smiled.

And for the briefest of moments all was still.

Then, Big Ben began to chime, and a wheezing and groaning sound echoed across London, as the TARDIS arrived and Linda threw up.

`Happy Christmas,' she muttered.

Later...

Linda staggered on to Embankment and idly waved her arm into the road.

`Taxi,' she muttered. 'Come on! Obviously distressed girl needs a taxi back to an empty flat. It's an offer you can't refuse.'

She watched as car after car drove past. Driving home for Christmas.

`You're too late,' she called to nobody in particular. 'It's already Christmas so you're too late!'

Then, to her surprise, a car pulled over. Briefly, she wondered why it had stopped. Then, remembering that she needed a taxi, she stepped

towards it and opened the door.

`Good evening,' she announced. 'You a taxi?'

The driver smiled. 'Yeah, get in.'

`Cheers, mate.' She tried to sound sober and confident as she clambered on to the back seat. Immediately she felt warm and safe and closer to home.

`Hiya, I'd like to go to Peckham, please.' She frowned. `So I can be home for Christmas.'

Home, she thought as the taxi moved to rejoin the traffic. Home? Poxy little flat in poxy little Peckham.

The taxi driver looked back at her. 'You're not going to be sick, are you?' His eyes glanced down.

Nah! Done that.' She paused. 'Everything okay?'

`Sorry.' The driver looked back up into her face and licked his lips. 'Peckham it is.'

Linda looked down at where he'd been staring and waggled her toes.

Sandals? On a night like tonight? Seriously, what had she been thinking?

The Doctor shivered as he stepped out of the TARDIS. The street was packed with people heading home but none of them seemed to have noticed the police box appearing out of nowhere. He pulled the door shut and began to walk through the crowds. He'd used the TARDIS to pinpoint the location of the Festulasions' base on Earth and to his complete lack of surprise, he'd found himself in London.

After all, he thought, where else did the population manage to continually ignore what's occurring around them? War with Iraq was just around the corner.

People were going missing. Over the last few months, they'd survived endless poll tax riots and the threat of mad cow disease and so much more. Their ability to continue living their little lives despite whatever was thrown at them still amazed him. On one level, he wanted to grab each passing reveller, shake them by the shoulders and tell them to take notice of what was happening. On another, however, he wanted

to grab each one and shake them by the hand.

Instead, he shoved his hands firmly into his pockets and began to walk through the crowds, towards the secret alien base.

`You spending Christmas with your family?'

Linda looked up from re-reading thèno smoking' sign for the fourth time.

`Sorry?' she asked.

The taxi driver glanced back at her. 'I was just asking ifyou were going home for Christmas You're not from round here, are you?'

Linda put on a cockney accent. 'That obvious, is it, mate?'

The taxi driver laughed. 'Where you from? The suburbs?'

`Yeah, but not this time.'

She noticed his shoulders suddenly tense up.

`You're not from this time?'

She flinched at the absurdity of the question then laughed. 'No, I meant, well, I'm not going back this time. Last Christmas was just horrible so this year it's just me. I decided it last year. New decade, new Linda. No family, no screaming nephews, no parents. Just me, a few bottles of red and a whole load of cake.'

The taxi driver laughed. 'Sounds like fun.'

`Yeah, and you know what the best bit is?' She smiled before leaning forward.

'No Queen's Speech!'

The taxi driver was about to reply when suddenly his radio burst into life. Linda sat back and told herself once more that she hadn't made some huge mistake. She was 22 and she was living her new life in the city. She didn't need the hassle of yet another dreary family Christmas

The taxi stopped at a set of traffic lights. The driver turned to look at her.

`Sorry, love, but are you okay if I just go back to base? They're busier than they expected and there's a couple there going Peckham way.'

A couple? Great. Just what I need.

`No, go for it. I'm in no rush.'

She smiled at the taxi driver as he turned back to face the front. Through the windscreen, she watched the huddled-up pedestrians as they crossed the road.

One man was going in the other direction. Caught in the taxi's headlights, he turned and looked directly at her. She flinched and felt the world change. For what might have been hours they stared at each other, then the lights changed to green.

He continued to walk and the taxi started up once more.

The room was painted an unwelcoming green, stank of cigarettes and body odour and yet the people inside believed themselves to be in Heaven on Earth. A black-and-white telly was showing Midnight Mass from St Paul's, its volume turned down and its pictures ignored. A radio was playing World in Motion, as part of the year's supposed highlights. Behind a desk, a large, chain-smoking woman with yellow hair was flicking idly through the Radio Times, stopping occasionally to circle programmes with a pink highlighter. Next to the counter, a man in his twenties was eating a burger, juice and drool dripping down his shirt as he tried not to stare at a young couple slobbering all over each other. By the door, a group of young men were arguing and a teenage girl was comforting her crying friend.

And then the door opened and the woman stopped circling programmes, the couple stopped kissing, the men stopped fighting and the girl stopped repeating

`He's not worth it' as the strangest creature any of them had ever seen stepped inside. Tall, with a mass of curly blond hair and dressed in a coat that seemed to contain every colour known to man, he smiled. New Order and the England football squad stopped singing and for a brief second there was silence.

`Good evening,' he beamed at his captive audience. 'Don't mind me, I'm just looking for a taxi.'

* * *

Linda sighed as the cab pulled up outside the taxi rank. She looked out at the nondescript building and leant forward, trying to read a poster on the redbrick wall.

She leant further forward, her nose pressed up against the car window and giggled as her breath caused the glass to fog up. She started to draw a snowflake with her finger when, suddenly, she fell out onto the pavement as the taxi driver opened the door. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet.

Ì'm sorry!' he shouted. 'Oh, I'm so *sorry*. Are you damaged?'

`What did you do that for?' she cried.

He smiled. 'I figured it'd be nicer if you came inside for a few minutes. We can have a cup of tea and some biscuits. Or wine and cake.'

Linda looked into his eyes and then over his shoulder at the people inside. A man had his back to her.

'Er... okay. Whatever.' She pulled her arm free from his hand and stepped towards the door. 'It's not like I have to be up early tomorrow.'

The Doctor stood still in the silence. 'Sorry? Is everyone all right?' He paused. 'Er...

happy Christmas?'

A voice sounded behind him. 'It's not like I have to be up early tomorrow.'

He turned suddenly and looked at the new arrival.

`Go home.'

Linda looked at the man and felt her stomach lurch once more. It wasn't his manner or the strangeness of his piercing grey eyes.

'What the hell are you wearing?' she asked. 'Is it meant to look like that or have you been sick down it?'

He smirked and, looking down at her own splattered blouse, so did she.

`Hello, I'm the Doctor and this isn't a taxi rank. Turn around and go home,' he said.

`Hello, I'm Linda and this is a taxi rank. Turn around and go inside as I'm freezing my bits off out here.'

She pushed past him and sauntered over to the gaping receptionist. 'Hi, the driver said I could have some tea and cake. You got any tea and cake?'

The receptionist glared up at her. 'No.'

`Well, then why did...'

She trailed offas she heard the door behind her slam shut. She turned, ready to have a go at the bloke who'd told her to go home.

He, however, was on his knees, his mouth screaming but making no noise. The taxi driver was behind him, one hand taking a key from the door, the other gripped tightly around the back of the other man's neck.

`You will give *me* your toes,' said the driver quietly. He let go of the other man's neck and held up his hands. And, as Linda watched, the hands changed. The fingers grew and became pointed. The skin peeled off, revealing dull grey scales.

His fingernails dropped to the floor as claws shot out through the ends of each digit.

Surprisingly, nobody screamed. Linda stood still for a moment then looked 202

down at the man in the nightmare coat. As everyone else stayed perfectly still, trying to blend into the green walls, she hesitantly stepped forward. Ignoring the staring taxi driver with his claws glinting under the fluorescent light, she took another step. She crouched down and turned the man on to his back. His eyes suddenly flashed open, looking directly into hers. She flinched once more.

Àre you okay?' she asked.

Ì've been better,' he replied.

`Why does he want our toes?' she asked.

`They're a popular bar snack.'

Linda looked up at the taxi driver. His skin had now completely melted away.

His entire body was covered in the same dull, grey scales. His eyes were a bright green and his hands and feet now ended in vicious claws. Also, maybe it was just the fact that she was crouched down, but he seemed taller.

She looked back down at the man. 'Can you help us?'

He smiled. 'Yes. That's why I'm here.'

Suddenly, he sat up and grinned at the still-silent and still-unmoving watchers.

È*very*one okay?' he asked. Seemingly choosing one at random, he asked, 'You, what's your name"

The boy with the burger tried to speak. Then he cleared his throat and tried again. 'Leonard.'

`Well, Leonard. I'm the Doctor. Nice to meet you.'

The boy slowly turned away from the tall grey lizard and looked down at the Doctor. 'Er... yeah. You too.'

`Mind if I have some of that burger, Leonard? Actually, on second thoughts best not. I'm meant to *be* vegetarian.'

'I' m a vegetarian too,' said Linda quietly.

`Really, Linda? Small world.' The Doctor grinned. 'Now, help me to my feet, there's a good girl.'

She helped him to stand and stepped back as he turned to face the monster.

It hissed at him. 'Doctor.'

`That's right. Now, why don't you turn around and go back to your space station.'

`We need the humans' toes.' It stepped forward.

`No, you don't.' The Doctor stepped forward.

They stood, inches apart, staring into each other's eyes.

`Just leave. While you still can.'

The monster tilted its head to one side. 'I cannot. If I leave now, I'll be sacked.'

`Sacked?' shouted the Doctor. 'Sacked?'

Ì have to fulfil my quota.'

The Doctor looked appalled. 'This is your job?'

A voice sounded from behind him. 'It's double-pay tonight.'

The Doctor and Linda turned around to face the woman sitting behind the counter. She put down the highlighter and stood up.

Ìs it going to happen again?' whispered Linda.

The Doctor looked at her. 'I'd imagine so, wouldn't you?'

And, sure enough, the woman began to change.

Ànyone else?' The Doctor surveyed the room. 'Come on! Don't be shy!'

Linda resisted the urge to clutch on to his arm. 'I think two... what are they?'

Festulasions

.'

Àre they... you know, aliens?'

The Doctor's eyebrows raised. 'No, Linda. It's fancy-dress night.'

Despite herself, she smirked. 'That's you sorted then. Really, though, I think two aliens are quite enough.'

`Three.'

She gasped. 'Three aliens?'

'That's right.'

'Leonard?' she whispered, indicating the clearly terrified burger-chewing boy.

Somehow the Doctor's eyebrows managed to rise even higher.

'Oh. You?'

The Festulasion behind the desk lifted up the counter and stalked towards them. 'We know you,' it hissed.

The Doctor stood in front of Linda and the other humans. 'Well, then you know what I can do. Leave now or you'll be toast.' He laughed. 'Did you see what I did there? Toes. Toast?'

Linda was shoved back against the counter as the other Festulasion loomed over the Doctor.

'Not a fan of puns, apparently,' rambled the Doctor. 'Well I hope I haven't put my foot in it.'

The Festulasion continued to advance, slimy drool dripping from its teeth.

'Of course, presumably I'm meant toe be terrified **but** I'm the Doctor and I usually end up giving the monsters a good kicking.'

The Festulasion continued its advance as the other dug its claws into the Doctor's shoulders, holding him still.

'Maybe the boot's on the other foot now? Still, the thing about me is

that I do like to be the centre of attention. Some would say that that's a bad thing. They'd even accuse me of being egotistical. Me! But, of course, while you're focused on me, you're ignoring the fact that one of the larger gentlemen in the room could be using the television set to smash through the door.'

There was a pause. Linda shouted. 'Didn't you hear him?'

The group of men spurted into action. One yanked the set off the wall and then he and his friend rammed it into the door, smashing it open.

vJ

The Festulasions paused, confused.

'Of course,' continued the Doctor. 'It won't help me, Linda, Leonard or the charming couple over by the counter. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your names?'

The girl spoke. 'Claire.' She paused, looking embarrassed. 'And... er...'

The boy spoke. 'Pete.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Well, sorry, Claire and Pete, but we're still trapped for the time being. Don't worry, though, you'll be home in time to unwrap your presents.

Let's just hope it isn't socks.'

The Festulasions roared. The one holding the Doctor released him and turned 2

to catch the escaping humans. It stalked over to the door and managed to grab hold of the last one. It was the girl who, a few moments before, had been crying.

She screamed as the claws grabbed the back ofher neck. Her friend dithered in the doorway unsure of what to do.

The Doctor turned around. 'Leave her. I'll make sure she's safe.'

The girl was dragged back inside as her friend followed the group of young men, screaming, into the road. The Festulasion threw the girl at the Doctor's feet and slammed the door shut.

The Doctor crouched down and helped her up. 'Sorry.'

Her eyes wide, she whispered, 'Connie. My name's Connie.'

The two aliens advanced on the terrified humans and herded them towards the door at the back of the office.

`Move through the door,' hissed one, flexing its claws.

The Festulasions followed them into the back office and closed the door behind them.

'Oh, dear,' muttered the Doctor. 'And I thought the front office was a bit grim.'

Linda laughed nervously. 'At least you add a bit of colour.'

Looking offended, the Doctor grasped his lapels. 'I'm extremely well-heeled, thank you!'

She looked around the cramped room. Faded floral wallpaper and a carpet that was so grimy she couldn't tell what colour it was. Other than that, it was empty.

Definitely empty, she thought. There certainly wasn't a table in the middle of the room and there definitely wasn't a machine on the table. And the machine most definitely did not have a worryingly large, stainless steel blade.

`Move back.' One of the Festulasions gestured to the far wall as the other began to clean the blade.

Linda, Leonard, Claire, Pete and Connie walked silently to the back of the room.

The Doctor, however, walked over to the machine.

`Can you make sure it's properly sterilised as I'd hate to catch anything nasty?

Especially with all this foot-and-mouth that's going around.'

The Festulasion looked down at him, confused. 'We're not monsters.'

The Doctor patted it on the back. 'Of course you're not. What's your name"

The alien continued to polish the blade. 'My name is unimportant.'

Ùnimportant? Of course it's not! I like to know who I'm defeating. Or are you simply Festulasion One and Festulasion Two?' he shouted over to the one guarding the humans.

It turned to look at him. 'I'm Agar. That's Hoyt.'

Àgar and Hoyt? Sounds like a dodgy law firm.'

Agar ignored him and turned back to the humans.

Ànd people say I'm rude.' The Doctor looked annoyed.

Linda tried desperately to ignore Agar's teeth and claws and breath and... well, Agar generally. She looked over at the Doctor. He smiled back at her and then glanced up at the ceiling. She started to look up and then, remembering that Agar was staring down at her, stopped. The Doctor continued to look upwards. She 205

shrugged and glanced meaningfully at Agar. The Doctor looked apologetic and for a second there was silence except for the sound of Hoyt cleaning the blade.

This is it, she thought. I'm going to die. I'm going to die in a room full of strangers and aliens and there's nothing I can do about it. She thought about the whole night and how she could have stayed in the pub or got a different taxi. She thought about how she could have gone home for Christmas. Suddenly, she pictured her mum and her dad and the tree and the arguments and the turkey and her bedroom and... her whole life. Am I going to let it end here? She looked at the others, wondering if they were thinking the same. Claire and Pete were holding each other.

Connie was rubbing the back of her neck. It had started to bleed a little. Leonard was silent, gripping on to his burger as if it was the only thing keeping him together. She looked over at the Doctor.

'What can I do?' she mouthed.

He turned away and, for a second, she thought he'd given up.

He looked up at Hoyt, who had finished cleaning the blade and was now unpacking some Tupperware containers.

`So, Hoyt,' he began. 'You've never considered *going* vegetarian?'

Hoyt ignored him.

Ìt's so much healthier, you know. Isn't that right, Linda?'

She struggled to speak. 'Er... yeah.'

Ànd I bet you'd love a bit of tofu. Like everything, though, there's a drawback.

Us vegetarians simply can't stand even the smell of meat. Isn't that right, Linda?'

Èr... well, I don't mind...'

He interrupted her. 'Isn't that right, Linda? Just being near any kind of meat makes us feel physically sick. It drives us to distraction.'

And, suddenly, she realised.

Òh!' she said, louder. 'That is so right.'

She lunged at Leonard and grabbed the burger from his hand. 'Don't you realise how selfish you are, eating this near to me?'

Leonard looked even more terrified as she threw the burger away from them. It hit the opposite wall and Agar, distracted, turned to look as it slurped on to the floor. Quickly, Linda glanced up and saw what the Doctor had been indicating. In the ceiling, directly above her, was a skylight. She could see the stars. She quickly looked down as Agar turned back to them.

`You will be first, Linda,' it sneered.

She looked at the seven-foot-tall lizard with its green eyes and razor-sharp claws. She looked in its eyes and laughed. 'Yeah, whatever.'

The Doctor grinned. `So, Hoyt. Toes? Why?'

Hoyt continued to lay out the plastic containers. 'They're crunchy,' it said, without looking up.

`So are Twiglets.'

`What are Twiglets?' it asked, pulling out some cling film.

Òh, they're delicious. Very moreish though. I usually end up eating the whole packet at once. Tell me, Hoyt, why keep us alive?'

206

Hoyt stood up. 'Why do you ask so many questions?'

Ì' m just interested, that's all.'

`The toes would lose their freshness if we took them from the dead.'

The Doctor looked at Linda again. This time his eyes shot to the side. She slowly turned to look at what he was indicating this time. Connie.

`So, there'd be trouble if one of us was to suddenly, say, drop down dead?'

Linda glanced again at Connie. Connie with the bleeding neck. Carefully, she nudged her. The girl turned towards her.

`Die,' mouthed Linda.

Connie stared at her.

`Die,' hissed Linda.

Agar suddenly reached out and grabbed Linda. 'Stop talking!' It wrapped its claws around her throat and started to dig its claws in. Linda refused to scream even as they pierced her skin. Everything began to fade to black as she heard the Doctor shout something. Then, suddenly, Agar released its grip as someone screamed. Gasping for breath, Linda turned towards Connie. She'd collapsed on to the floor.

She'd died.

Àgar! You idiot!' yelled Hoyt. 'What did you do?'

Agar swung around. 'It wasn't me! You damaged her when she tried to escape.'

Linda crouched down and felt the side of Connie's neck. Connie's eyes flickered open. She winked.

`She's not dead! Have you got any bandages? Or water? Or something?'

The Doctor tried to run over but was stopped by Hoyt grabbing his arm. He gasped in pain.

`That's it, Hoyt! Kill another one, why don't you?' Agar was furious.

The Doctor, struggling, shouted. 'She needs air! Bring her over here!' He paused, then looked down at Linda. 'It's too crowded at that end of the room. It wouldn't be so bad if young Pete wasn't so tall.'

`Sorry,' muttered Pete, looking embarrassed. 'I don't... I mean, I didn't... what?'

Linda elbowed his shin and they both winced as bone hit bone. Then, grabbing Connie's legs, she tried to pull her away from the others. 'It's no good. She's just too heavy.'

She felt Connie tense up. 'Sorry,' she whispered before looking up at Agar. 'Help me, then!'

Agar reached down and grabbed one of Connie's ankles. It started to pull her into the middle of the room. Linda stood up and backed the others against the wall. She grabbed Pete and quickly began to whisper into his ear.

`Linda!' shouted Agar. 'You will come over here and help me!'

She paused, looking up at the skylight.

She looked at the Doctor as he stared back at her.

She looked over at Connie and Agar.

And she knew she what she had to do.

`You understand?' she whispered.

Pete nodded.

She left the others and slowly walked over to Agar and Connie. She knelt down and took the girl's hand. Gently, she squeezed it.

Ìt'll be okay, Connie,' she said. Then she bent down and whispered into her ear.

Agar pulled her away. 'What are you doing?'

Ì was just trying to comfort her,' she shouted. 'That's all! Now, have you got any bandages?'

Agar shook its head as Hoyt walked over to them. 'Would this do?'

It handed her the cling film.

`That'll do fine.'

Gently, she raised Connie's head off the floor. Suddenly, Connie began to scream and thrash about. Nervously, Hoyt and Agar crouched down.

`What's happening to her?' pleaded Hoyt.

Ìt's part of the healing process, isn't that right, Doctor?' shouted Linda.

The Doctor, shouting above the screams, agreed. 'That's it, nurse. The more noise she makes the better.'

Looking over Agar's shoulder, Linda winked at Pete. Unseen by the Festulasions, he crouched down and gestured for Leonard to climb onto his shoulders. Leonard wrapped his hands around the taller man's head.

`Mind my eyes!' hissed Pete as he stood up, pushing him towards the ceiling.

Leonard reached up and undid the catch on the skylight. The window slowly creaked open.

The Doctor rushed over to Connie. 'How's she doing?' he shouted.

Leonard pulled himself up through the window and out on to the roof.

`She's getting better,' shrieked Linda loudly as she began to wrap cling film around Connie's neck.

Pete bent down and Claire climbed onto his shoulders.

Ì hope you're watching this!' bellowed the Doctor at Agar and Hoyt.

Pete stood up. Leonard's arms reached down through the skylight, grabbing Claire's hands.

Agar shouted. 'We are! Of course, we wouldn't have to if Hoyt had been more careful.'

Leonard pulled Claire up through the skylight.

Hoyt grabbed Agar. 'Why do you always blame me? Just once, can't you let it go?'

Leonard's and Claire's arms reached down as Pete's reached up.

Linda continued to cocoon Connie's neck in the cling film. 'Are you two seeing each other?'

Grabbing Pete's hands, Leonard and Claire started pulling him towards the ceiling.

`We might not be. Not after tonight!' yelled Hoyt. 'I'm sick of you always shouting at me.'

Slowly, Leonard and Claire continued to pull Pete up. Leonard's greasy hands began to slide out of Pete's.

'I was going to end it anyway,' yelled Agar. 'I've met someone else!'

Connie looked over as Pete struggled not to fall. She started to thrash about even more.

Àre you sure she's getting better?' shouted Hoyt.

`Drop me and you're a dead man,' hissed Pete.

Ì know what I'm doing,' shrieked Linda.

Leonard tightened his grip and he and Claire struggled up to the roof. Suddenly, Pete began to laugh.

As one, Agar and Hoyt turned. The skylight slammed down, the glass shattering. Connie stopped screaming and there was silence as shards ofglass fell on to the carpet.

Òh, dear,' said the Doctor. 'There go another thirty toes.'

Hoyt roared. 'You've tricked us for the last time!' It grabbed the Doctor around the throat. 'You're not human! Your toes don't matter!'

The Doctor tried to pull the claws free as Hoyt forced him back towards the wall.

`My toes don't matter? I'll have you know that Time Lord toes are a genuine delicacy on a number of worlds.'

Snarling, Hoyt slammed the Doctor into the wall.

Linda looked down at Connie and glanced at the door. The girl tried to nod but her chin stuck in the cling film neck brace. She squeezed Linda's hand before letting go.

Linda jumped to her feet and threw herself on to Hoyt's back. She started to scream and punch it in the face. It let go of the Doctor and swung around.

`Get her off me!' it bellowed at Agar.

Agar roared and ran over to them. It reached to grab Linda and then stopped. It turned back just in time to see the door close behind Connie as she ran out of the office.

'No!'

Hoyt stopped trying to shake Linda off and stood still. She let go of its neck and fell to the floor. As Agar and Hoyt stood silent and confused, she walked over to the Doctor.

He looked down at her. 'Well done, Linda.'

She smiled. 'Well done, Doctor.'

Flexing their claws, Agar and Hoyt began to walk towards them.

Linda grabbed the Doctor's hand. 'Is this it?' she asked.

The colour faded from the Doctor's face.

Òh,' she said. 'This is it.'

`You saved them, Linda,' he said, squeezing her hand. 'Happy Christmas.'

`You too, Doctor.' She closed her eyes and felt the hot breath of the two Festulasions as they bore down on her.

Then, suddenly, Agar swore.

Ì beg your pardon!' she heard the Doctor explain. 'I'd rather that that wasn't the last word I hear before I die. It's not exactly festive.'

Trying desperately not to cry, Linda opened one eye.

Agar was clutching its foot. Green blood was seeping through its claws.

She opened the other eye.

Hoyt rushed over to Agar. 'What is it?'

Ì stood on the glass,' muttered Agar, grimacing.

209

Linda looked down at the floor. A pool of green blood was adding yet another stain to the carpet. Bits of the shattered skylight were scattered around.

And there, in the middle of it all, sat one lonely grey toe.

`My toe!' hissed Agar.

Linda laughed as Agar hobbled over to the table and leant against it. She looked down at the alien's foot and shuddered as blood continued to gush out of where the toe had been.

And, forcing its way through the blood, appeared another toe.

Hoyt hovered around Agar as the Festulasion screamed in agony.

And, then, a miracle happened as a new toe was born.

Agar stopped screaming and looked over at the Doctor and Linda. Both had their mouths open in surprise.

`What?' it asked.

`You... I mean... you can...' began the Doctor.

`What is it?' asked Hoyt, looking confused.

`You can just... that...' Linda pointed at the new toe.

Agar looked at Hoyt. 'What?'

`Your feet,' said the Doctor. 'They can regenerate!'

Agar shrugged. 'Well, yes. Just the toes though.'

There was a pause before Hoyt started to giggle nervously. 'But... don't... well, isn't that the case with everyone?'

Agar looked at the Doctor. 'Don't human toes just grow back?'

The Doctor and Linda silently shook their heads.

`But, we thought... I mean, we just take their toes! Then we drive them home.

They're always unconscious by that point.'

Ànd you never thought to check up on them?'

Agar and Hoyt looked embarrassed. 'No,' said Hoyt. 'We just assumed... you mean, we've been permanently damaging them?'

Agar and Hoyt looked at each other. Òh...'

Linda Grainger looked up at the stars. The air was cold around her but she didn't care. She looked down the street as people began to leave the church. They were hugging each other and shouting 'Happy Christmas' as they began to separate and head home. A few of them were singing and, suddenly, she felt like joining in.

Then, a noise sounded behind her.

`That's you back, then?' she said, without turning.

Ì've taken them home. The Festulasions genuinely didn't know what they were doing.'

She laughed. 'Did any of us?'

He put a hand on her shoulder. 'Of course we did.'

He turned her around and looked down into her eyes. 'You were magnificent in there.'

She grinned. 'It's all... I don't know. Well, it's the maddest Christmas I've ever had.'

A couple walked by and wished them a merry Christmas.

Linda laughed and returned the greeting. 'They don't know. None of

them.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'That's life.'

Ì could see what you were doing in there. You made yourself the centre of attention.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'You're suggesting I'm egotistical? Me?'

`No,' she said, quietly. 'You did it so we wouldn't be scared. We were too busy looking at you to even consider what was happening.'

`Quiet little me? Hah! Must be the coat.'

They laughed.

Then he stopped. 'I can take you away from all of this, Linda Grainger.' He waved up at the stars. 'You could come with me to worlds where it's always Christmas and meet creatures that make Agar and Hoyt look like your next-door neighbour. There are even worlds out there where they've never heard of Cliff Richard!'

She looked into his eyes and felt a lump forming in her throat.

He shook his head sadly. 'No?'

Linda Grainger opened her eyes and looked at her family. Mum was shouting at Dad, who'd clearly had too much to drink. He was trying to swing her around the living-room floor. Mum stopped shouting and started to laugh. Over on the other sofa, Granddad Edward was quietly snoring, exhausted after, once again, telling everyone his life story. Little Kylie was crawling towards him armed with a biro. On the telly, the Queen was moaning about something or other. Linda looked through into the kitchen and saw the smokers leaning out of the window. Lorna from next door was chatting to them about last night's Coronation Street. Apparently, Sally Webster had given birth in the back of Don's taxi. Linda snuggled back into the sofa, suddenly feeling so very happy. Everything as it should be. Then Dad swung Mum around too fast and they both fell into the Christmas tree.

Linda laughed.

`Thanks, Doctor,' she whispered.

Xanna Eve Chown

An *Adventure* of *the Second* Doctor,

with Victoria *Waterfield*

Brother Grimaldius made a gesture of peace as he ushered the last of the pilgrims from the holy grave of the blessed. One hesitated, hoping to touch the tomb a last time. But Brother Lupus, catching his eye, started tidying the vials of sanctified oil in a way that suggested no such allowances would be made.

`Go with Brother Grimaldius,' he muttered under his breath to the younger monk at his side. 'Make sure that he lets in no more visitors tonight. The brother has too much compassion and will never say no to latecomers, even when the time for vespers approaches.' He watched the monk hurry across the mosaic-tiled floor of Saint Nicholas's Church. Evening prayers be damned, he thought. It was nearly time for supper and he hadn't eaten for hours. The pilgrims could come back again in the morning — it wasn't as if Saint Nicholas was going anywhere. He had been dead for seven hundred years.

`You know, I haven't been here since poor old Nicholas's funeral,' the Doctor exclaimed, tapping the air with his recorder. He was sitting in a dark corner of an inn close by the port of Myra, wearing a large cloak. He had convinced his companion to wear one too, so they wouldn't attract attention, but he wasn't playing by his own rules. He had thrown back his hood to reveal a mop of hair with a dishevelled fringe, and his crumpled jacket and bow tie were in plain view.

Almost everyone in the room was watching him pick out Christmas carols on his recorder for his companion to guess.

He played a flurry of notes and smiled beseechingly.

`Come on, Victoria, you should know this one.'

The Holly and the Ivy?' she asked hesitantly.

`Silent Night!'

A man at the next table threw them a nasty look.

`Not until he puts that thing away, it won't be,' he said. 'But, then again, you look like a lady who might like the noisier kind of night...'

Victoria opened her huge eyes even wider and plucked at the Doctor's sleeve.

Ì' m not sure this is the best time to be here,' she said nervously.

`Nonsense, Victoria,' said the Doctor, putting the recorder down. 'Ten-eighty-six would have been too early, and 1088 much too late. I made a promise, you know.'

`That's not exactly what I meant,' whispered Victoria. 'I mean, I don't think we should be *here...'*

`Would you like to go back to the TARDIS?' he asked kindly. 'You could go and fetch Jamie. He'll probably be awake by now.' Victoria shook her head. Jamie 213

rushing in to defend her honour was likely to make the situation worse rather than better. 'Another drink?' Victoria grimaced, looking at the full cup on the table in front of her. 'There's a good girl,' he said absentmindedly. His eyes flicked to the door, then down at the bundle of dark green cloth on the table in front of him.

Drumming his fingers into his palm, he turned to the man who had spoken. 'I say, how far are we from Saint Nicholas's Church?'

Brother Lupus turned one of the vials of blessed oil around in his hands. It was only a few miles from the church to the port of Myra, but he wished it were further away. Then the pilgrims might think twice about visiting at all hours of the day and night. He watched Brother Grimaldius lingering in the narthex, talking avidly to the pilgrims and gesturing at the candlelit walls. The frescoes showed scenes from the life of the Bishop of Myra, portraying all the miraculous deeds he had performed on the way to becoming Saint Nicholas.

Brother Grimaldius never tired of telling stories of the miracles to anyone who would listen. The local children loved the tale of the boys who had drowned in pickle barrels and were brought back to life by the bishop. Travellers preferred the story of his generosity when, one winter's night, he threw bags of gold through an open window to save three sisters from poverty and prostitution.

`The bags landed in stockings that were hanging by the fire...' Grimaldius would say, pausing for effect. 'And, in the morning, the girls had no idea where the mysterious gift had come from.'

If the bishop didn't tell anyone what he'd done, how does everyone know the story, Lupus wondered sourly. The chapel stank of myrrh, and it made his head ache when he stayed near the tomb too long. There would be no time to refill the well of holy oil beside the sarcophagus tonight. He would *do* it tomorrow morning, before the first visitors arrived. If it weren't for the 'miracle' of the fragrant bones, the pilgrims would be less devout in their attentions, he thought.

`Holy oil wells up in the tomb, pouring from the bones and perfuming the whole church with myrrh,' said the man, warming to his theme and making sure Victoria looked suitably impressed. 'They say that the oil can cure anything and anyone — it is the proof that the bishop is a saint, who loves all people.'

`Yes, he was a kindly sort of chap,' said the Doctor, chuckling. 'You could hardly walk down the street without someone rushing up to ask a favour.'

The man looked at him strangely. 'Once, at a mother's request, he prayed so hard that he saved her son and his two friends from drowning in a storm.'

Òf course, I remember that!' exclaimed the Doctor. 'The people in the town were so pleased! But the funny thing is, he really did hate being the centre of attention. He tried to do his good works in secret, but you know what these small towns are like.'

`You speak as if you were there,' said the man, frowning.

`Doctor...' said Victoria warningly.

'He asked me how he would be remembered,' the Doctor continued wistfully. 'I told him he would be the children's favourite saint. He liked that...'

Ì don't know who you are talking about, but it's not Saint Nicholas!' The man angrily thumped the table in front of him.

`No,' said Victoria hurriedly. 'He's talking about Father Christmas.'

`The name Santa Claus derives from Saint Nicholas,' said the Doctor patiently.

`We've been through this before, Victoria.'

Victoria put her hand to her head in despair.

Ì have never heard of Sandy Claws,' said the man, rising to his feet. 'But this sounds like blasphemy.'

The Doctor suddenly noticed that every eye in the room was on him.

Òh, dearie me.'

There was a crash from the direction of the church door, and a loud shout. Brother Lupus turned angrily. How many more travellers could want to see the tomb at this time of night? Trust Grimaldius to let them in.

`Who calls and threatens the peace of our saint...?' he began, but stopped when he saw the group of men who had pushed their way into the chapel. They looked like sailors, roughly dressed and unshaven, making no attempt to conceal the long swords under their cloaks. Their leader stepped forward, raising an arm to quieten the men behind him.

Ìf it please you,' he said, in an Italian accent. 'This is where we find the body of Saint Nicholas, most revered of God's chosen?'

`For what purpose do you ask this?' replied Brother Lupus, frowning slightly at the emphasis on the word 'body'. Most pilgrims asked to see the holy tomb or the fragrant oil. 'You do not intend —' he laughed sharply, `— to exhume the body itself?'

The sailor who had addressed him inched closer. He was not smiling.

Ì respect you, brother monk, but I ask again. Show me the body of the blessed bishop.'

Òf course you may pay your respects to the body that lies under the tomb,' said Brother Grimaldius, hurrying forwards and gesturing to the niche in the wall that held the sarcophagus. 'You have travelled far, and I would not like to see your efforts go in vain.'

Now the corners of the sailor's lips twitched upwards. 'Know then, noble monk,' he said, grinning, 'that we have sailed from Bari with the exact purpose of removing the holy remains of our inspired father from this heathen place.' He made a stiff bow, keeping his eyes on the monk's face.

Brother Grimaldius drew back in horror. 'Saint Nicholas will never

allow his body to be touched!' he exclaimed. 'I beg of you to leave before the townspeople hear of your plan and kill you.'

`Let me deal with this, Matthew,' said the sailor behind him, drawing his sword.

`Please don't get upset,' said Victoria. 'We haven't come to cause trouble.' The innkeeper positioned himself between the Doctor and the angry man.

`Let me get this straight,' said the man slowly. 'You just want to see Saint Nicholas's resting place?'

215

There was a shout from the street outside, and the doors flew open.

'No, no,' said the Doctor, shaking his head as several sailors burst into, the room, throwing themselves into wooden chairs by the door. 'I'm afraid it's too late for that now.' He sidestepped round the innkeeper. 'Here we go, Victoria,' he muttered. 'This shouldn't take long. You wait here, eh?' He waved at the sailors.

Èxcuse me, but, your accent, sir — might I be so bold as to ask — you're not from Bari, are you? You are? Oh, good heavens, a drink for these men!'

They looked as though they'd had at least one drink already. The two nearest the Doctor hooked an arm under each shoulder and drew him over to their table.

`What do you know of Bari?'

'I am looking to meet your ship's captain,' said the Doctor. 'I have an important trade to make. If you would tell me where your ship is anchored...'

'He won't be there,' growled one man. 'He's taking care of business.'

`Quite right, quite right!' The Doctor tapped the side of his nose knowledgeably.

'God's work, no less?'

'You know of his mission?' asked the man, drawing the Doctor closer. His breath smelt sour and the Doctor fidgeted uncomfortably. The room went suddenly quiet.

Brother Lupus moaned in terror, dropping the vial of holy oil he was holding on to the stone floor. Everything was silent for a fraction of a second as all the men waited to hear the glass shatter. Then, every eye watched as the vial rolled over the hard stone unbroken.

'It is a miracle!' shouted Matthew. 'By this sign, Saint Nicholas has shown himself to be on our side. No man alive can stop us now!' He rushed to the tomb, gesturing to his friends and suddenly, with a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, Brother Lupus noticed that they were carrying large mallets

'In God's name...' he began, but Matthew turned to him, eyes blazing.

'Saint Nicholas will not rest in a heathen country,' he said. 'Ever since the cursed infidel took Antioch, I have been plagued with portents and visions. I will not rest until these bones lie in Christian lands.'

The sailors raised their mallets above their heads, and the monks cowered, turning their faces from the awful crash as the stones of *the* tomb shattered to pieces beneath the blows.

It took three more drinks for the sailors to tell the Doctor the way to the ship, and another two for them to allow him to leave with Victoria. She clung to the Doctor's arm as they made their way down to the harbour. The Doctor was panting slightly and the contents of the bundle he was holding rattled as he shifted its weight under his arm.

At the entrance to the harbour, the Doctor motioned to Victoria to stop. They crouched down in the shadows and watched. Someone was tending a small fire in the rocks by the Italian ship. A group of men approached, shouting and laughing.

They stopped by the fire and the leader put down a box, gesturing wildly. Then, the group split away, leaving two men behind on guard.

Keeping Victoria behind him, the Doctor crept towards them, staying in the shadows until he was close enough to hear their voices.

Ì don't see why I couldn't go to the inn too,' grumbled one man.

`For God's sake, give it a rest, Disigius, we're not here for long. Matthew's gone to round up the others, then we're leaving,' growled the other.

The Doctor peered at the men. On the ground between them was a small wooden box. He beamed when he saw it and patted Victoria on the shoulder.

'Oh, this should be easy. When I start talking to the sailors, I want you to pick up that box, and take it back to the TARDIS. Do you think you can do that?'

Victoria nodded uncertainly.

`Good girl.' The Doctor strode out in front of the sailors.

Àll right, stop right where you are,' said one sailor, standing up and drawing his sword. 'Who are you?'

`Venetian spy!' suggested the other, coming closer to take a look.

`Do I look like a Venetian spy?' asked the Doctor indignantly. 'I mean, look at me!' He flapped his arms up and down. 'Look at *me!'* As both sailors stared at him, a Victoria-shaped shadow moved around the other side of the fire. The first sailor grabbed the sleeve of the Doctor's jacket.

`You can tell a Venetian by his dress sense.' He laughed, rubbing the material between his fingers. 'Maybe he is, Disigius. Do a twirl for us then, Venetian, show us your finery.' He pushed the Doctor and the bundle he was holding clattered to the floor. Suddenly the laughter stopped.

`What's this you've got?' the man asked suspiciously, throwing a glance at the empty spot on the floor where the casket had been. 'What trick is this?' He took a firmer grip on the Doctor's arm and twisted it behind his back, making him yell in pain. 'The box has gone.'

`Well done, Victoria,' thought the Doctor. Disigius stared at the bundle on the ground and then at the Doctor.

`You dare to steal what we have taken in God's name" he asked quietly. 'Saint Nicholas himself commended us to this holy duty.' He stooped to unwrap the top layer of the bundle, revealing a glint of white bone. Averting his eyes, he covered it again. Then he raised a hand to his head.

'I can see Saint Nicholas's anger!' he said in an unearthly voice.

`He's having a vision,' muttered the other sailor.

`How have you removed the bones from the sacred casket without us noticing?'

This was not a question the Doctor wanted to address.

`Don't touch the bones!' he warned, trying to match Disigius's sepulchral tones.

`Great punishments will strike down anyone who dares to sully the... er... holy relics!'

The other sailor looked impressed. But Disigius was not to be outdone. He bent down and scooped up the bundle. 'I hold the blessed cloth,' he declared loudly, ànd it burns!'

`Does it?' asked the Doctor, alarmed. 'I don't see why —'

Ìt burns and I burn with the holy flame of truth!' Disigius shouted. The other sailor, who had been watching with alarm, took a step back.

`Maybe you should put it down, then?' he suggested. He was wary of Disigius, but more afraid of provoking the wrath of the saint. Disigius wasn't listening.

`He's always having visions,' the sailor whispered to the Doctor. Disigius fell to his knees, cradling the bundle, and started to weep.

The Doctor began edging away. The other sailor made a half-hearted attempt to stop him, but couldn't tear his eyes from his friend, who was clutching the bundle to his chest and moaning.

The Doctor ran.

Back in the TARDIS, Victoria put the box gently down on the floor by the console and covered it with her cloak.

Ìf Saint Nicholas's bones are in here, what do the sailors have?' she asked.

`Their just desserts!' replied the Doctor. Victoria pouted. 'They wanted bones, so I gave them bones. Plastic ones from a school science lab.'

`Won't they notice?'

`They'll think it's a miracle.'

`They'll be pleased, then,' said Victoria. 'That's not right! They did a dreadful thing.'

'Oh, those bones cause them a lot of trouble, don't you worry.' The Doctor rubbed his hands together. 'Storms at sea, arguments on board ship and, oh, Victoria, you should see the riots when they land in Bari! The local bishop actually attacks the archbishop!'

Victoria frowned. `So what are we doing with the real bones?' she asked. 'They need a proper burial. Otherwise, we've done a dreadful thing too. We've stolen a saint's bones!'

`No, no, my dear. Not stolen. I promised Nicholas I'd take them away from all the squabbling and the miracles and so forth, and so I shall. I told him that his final resting place would be somewhere peaceful. Somewhere vast and quiet with nothing but white as far as the eye can see.'

`Like heaven,' said Victoria in a hushed voice, staring at the box by the console.

`Where are we going?'

`Where else would Father Christmas be buried?' The Doctor grinned. 'The North Pole.'

The Long Midwinter

Philip Purser-Hallard

An *Adventure* of the Eighth *Doctor,*

with Gemma and Samson Griffin

I. Kebalau

Kebalau is dancing against the cold.

Pushing upward with her nimbus, clinging and swinging with her hands, she's darting up and back and down and left and right and forward, alighting on whatever she can reach: the lantern strings bedecking the old house-shell, the giant creature's own balustrades and bevelling, the limbs of her brothers Eturu and Arape, even her

mother Wuter's branches where the old lady floats like a tetherkite.

It's better, Kebbi thinks, than shivering in the bitter currents, or huddling for warmth around the flamers' vents.

Ì' m a sparkfly!' she casts to her brothers, and Wuter too, in case the old woman's receiving. 'I'm a fleetflight, fluttering! Look, look, I'm a mote!'

`Calm down, Kebbi!' Eturu casts, but he is smiling. 'You'll never sleep! And Festival isn't for days yet.'

She sticks her tongue out, flickers her nimbus rudely. 'You're mephitic.'

Eturu's always wanting to be in charge now that he's threefold. With Mebbi and Lubbi away, it should be Wuter taking care of them — but Wuter hasn't even glimmered to anyone in the village since they unmoored their house-shells and set out for Treehaven and the Festival. Lubbi explained to Kebalau that Wuter has to concentrate: a special kind of concentration, to get her ready for her first time on the Tree. Now, with their guardians off mating with fourfold from the other villages, and getting the turn-shell for the Festival meal, Eturu's getting his wish.

Well, Arape might need to be looked after, but not Kebalau. Flashing her nimbus she dives underneath the house, clutching at vines and tendrils as she swings hand over hand across the great shell's chilly underside. Beneath her, other dwellings hang sedately or gently nose one another — new houses, like new people, have to come from somewhere — hundreds of thousands of them, far down into the distant cloud below. All flocked about with gliders, shell-boats, welter-wings and caravans, and, oh, so many people, more than Kebbi has seen or imagined in her three little-years of life.

Everyone in the world is here, according to old sevenfold Butavo, all gathered together for the warmth. In the far distance floats the World-Tree, focus of all this attention, surrounded by the globe-wood of the manyfold.

Kebalau pauses, then hangs between two leafy tentacles. She had been hoping, hoping more than anything, that she too would be threefold by the Festival. She's searched so hard for the beginnings of a leg-bud, but one never came. She knows now that she'll still be twofold when they build the Tree.

It smells. She should be old enough by now. Having only two limbs is mephitic.

Next Festival won't be for little-years and little-years, and then she'll be an old, old lady, older than Butavo, older than Wuter. She won't care about mote-bobbing or glitter-gleaming or any of the games — just working on the Tree with all the other crusty manyfold. It isn't fair.

(' Never mind, Kebbi,' Mebbi had cast soothingly at her when she complained the day before. 'You children are the lucky ones, you know. Lots of children grow up and manyfold without there ever being a Long Midwinter, and have to join the Tree at their first Festival, like Wuter. Or they're fourfold with children of their own, like Lubbi and me. You wouldn't like that.'

Mebbi smells too.)

Dancing again, Kebalau swoops back up on to the house-shell's lowest tier, ready to skip up to the top carapace behind her brothers and surprise them.

She stops abruptly.

A funny, unfamiliar thing is resting on the balcony's smooth nacre, nestling between a pair of flamers as if it has coalesced from their warm gases, or from nothing at all. Its shape is strange, all lines and angles like a geometry lesson, and it's a cold, dark colour. It has a light on top, which casts a pale nimbus of its own.

Kebalau stares, and wonders what sort of a creature it can be.

II. Samson

Samson Griffin's suit itched.

This was a problem, he thought ruefully, which a few months ago would only have cropped up on the way to a job interview or a funeral. The suit in question would have been dull but tasteful: probably bought from M&S, almost certainly by his mother, and accessorised with an equally maternally acceptable tie and smartly polished shoes.

He didn't think you could wear a tie with a spacesuit — or an Extreme

Atmosphere/Gravity Protection Casing, or whatever it was the Doctor had called the things.

However much it itched, though, Samson could hardly take it off The Doctor had made it quite clear that that option would result in him being immediately crushed, poisoned, roasted and irradiated by Yesod's boiling, noxious air and vicious gravity, and that didn't sound like a fun way to spend an afternoon.

He looked at his sister, or at as much of her as he could see through their frogman's faceplates. Unlike his own Protection Casing, which was a bilious yellow, hers was black. Different colours for identification purposes, apparently.

The Doctor, naturally, had got the one in tasteful TARDIS blue.

`Nifty burqa,' Samson told Gemma.

He didn't need his suit radio to relay her response. Their gauntlets had been designed to allow emphatic hand-gestures.

During the hour or so it had taken the Doctor to dig the outfits out of the TARDIS's hectares of wardrobe, Gemma had been climbing the walls. As always when they landed somewhere new, she wanted to get out and do things — out 220

where, and to do what exactly, didn't really matter, so long as both were new and exciting. Samson knew that touring time and space with an eccentric alien wasn't exactly the career path his kid sister had had in mind when she left college, but it seemed to suit her fine.

He was happy enough with it too, but then he'd been happy enough in his summer job at Folkestone Library. Easy to please, that was him.

Of course, drag him to the surface of a failed star, where the gravity could flatten a tank and the air would dissolve it afterwards, wrap him in a high-tech bin-liner and surround him with angry alien monsters, and suddenly local library work began to look a lot more appealing.

`No, really,' the Doctor was insisting patiently, 'we're not here to hurt your children. Or anybody else for that matter. We just want to study your suns. We didn't even mean to land on Yesod — we were trying for your satellite, Malkuth. It's a lot more hospitable for us humanoids.'

Samson didn't think the monsters looked convinced.

These ones were surprisingly human, at least compared with some of the aliens he'd *seen:* their faces, and the general shape of their bodies, were a pretty close match. The arms and legs were a bit of a giveaway, though. They had anywhere between one and seven of the things altogether, and the legs ended in hands, which gave even the four-limbed ones an ape-like appearance. The oldest-looking of them had limbs splayed out in all directions, like starfish.

Add to that their sheeny metallic skins, the glowing haloes that surrounded them (although those might be a function of the suit, which supposedly let him see into the infra-red and radio spectrums) and the fact that they could fly, or at least hover — not to mention the sinister organic-looking weapons they were carrying — and yes, the Yesodites had the alien-monster thing fairly well sewn up.

The Doctor, obviously, was in his element. Not literally of course, although Samson wouldn't have been entirely surprised to see him step out on to the platform in his usual ensemble — velvet frock coat flapping, long brown hair waving freely in the broiling acid soup which passed for air on Yesod. No more troubled by the searing atmosphere than the TARDIS — whose paint, Samson had noticed, wasn't *even* flaking in the heat.

Às I expect you know,' the Doctor was enthusing at the aliens, `Kether-Tiphereth is renowned as one of the most spectacular binary systems in this galaxy.' From the mini-lecture he'd given them back in the TARDIS, Samson recalled that Tiphereth was the nearer of the two suns (that'd be the huge red one filling about a quarter of the sky, then), while Kether was the distant, whiter point of fire rising behind it. 'We wanted to see it for ourselves.'

`Well, technically, you wanted us to see it,' put in Gemma.

`Yes, thank you, Gemma,' the Doctor said. 'No, really, your children seem very nice —' he smiled at one legless monstrosity who seemed to have taken a shine to him `-- but we have only just eaten, and besides...

`No, no, no,' he added hurriedly. 'I'm joking, honestly. Just trying to break the ice, so to speak... no, really, put the, er, seahorses down, I'm sure we can talk about this calmly...'

One of the four-limbed creatures grabbed the curious youngster by the hand, and pulled it back to join the other Yesodites. 'Stay back, Kebbi,'

the adult monster said.

Well, sort of said. In fact it pulsed its radio-halo in a glittery sort of way, and words came out of the speakers in Samson's suit. The voice was male, a pleasant baritone. How much of that was the suit's own doing, and how much was the TARDIS's usual translation trick, he hadn't a clue.

'You come here,' the adult Yesodite pulsed, addressing itself now to the interlopers, 'at Midwinter Festival, the coldest time of the entire Long Year, when our whole world is gathered together and vulnerable — you turn up at the World-Tree, the heart of our world — and you expect us to believe you're here for stargazing?'

'Best time of year for it,' the Doctor breezed. 'Crisp winter nights.'

These things were relative, Samson supposed. The temperature outside their suits would have flash-fried them in an instant. This was one of the helpful facts he'd learned while the Doctor was ferreting around in the TARDIS wardrobe.

Another was that the giant world was many millions of years in his and Gemma's future, but he was trying particularly hard not to think about that bit.

No, these creatures were very alien indeed, however humanish they might look.

They lived inside the atmosphere of what was virtually a star — which to Samson, who was in the habit of walking around on the outsides of things, was weird enough in itself. He couldn't see a chance of finding common ground with them

— not even the concept of 'common ground'. Or 'ground' of any kind, come to that.

'Hold on!' The Doctor tried to slap his forehead, and looked briefly confused when his gauntlet collided with his faceplate. 'You said "Midwinter Festival"!' He turned to beam at his friends. 'Gemma, Samson, did you hear that? It's Christmas!

And that —' he whirled back to face the aliens means it's time for presents!'

The suits had pockets in them, sealed against the atmosphere with strong plastic zips. Samson's were empty, but it seemed the Doctor had

piled his full of all the outrageous junk he generally carried round with him. 'What's your name"

the Doctor asked the Yesodite youngster as he rummaged busily. 'Kebbi, was it?'

'It's Kebalau,' the alien glimmered shyly, and the voice from Samson's suit became that of a small girl.

'Well, then, Kebalau,' the Doctor said. He pulled out a cut diamond, all glittering blue-green facets, of a size somewhere around the tennis-ball mark.

Samson's eyes bulged. He could see Gemma having a similar reaction.

'It doesn't do much, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said, 'but it's the only thing I have that'll survive your atmosphere.' He handed the diamond over to the little girl, and carefully ruffled her filigree-silver hair. 'Happy Midwinter Festival, Kebalau.'

Kebalau inspected her gift dubiously. There was a long pause. The Yesodites looked round uneasily at one another, but seemed to be deferring to the child's guardian.

Eventually the adult's halo pulsed again. 'Kebbi?' he asked the small girl sternly.

'What do we cast?'

III. Butavo

`Long, long ago,' Butavo cast, 'before any of you, or I, or anyone we know was yet a seed, this world of ours, Yesod, was always hot. She burned with her own fire, deep beneath where the lowest clouds are now. The world was bright and full of heat, and our ancestors, their children and animals were never cold. The creators had given them everything that they could ever need, and they wanted for nothing.'

The children stared wide-eyed at the old story-caster: onefold, twofold, threefold, even a limbless new-bud in his guardian's arms, all gave her their rapt attention. The floating platform of the gas-scallop's upper shell was ringed about with vigorous young flamers, and, as the creatures vented enthusiastically into the night air, these children could perhaps imagine, even at Midwinter, what it might be like

always to be warm.

They were children, with the imagination and the robustness of the young. Old Butavo felt nothing but the chill.

`Then slowly,' she continued, 'over many lifetimes, Yesod cooled. Her inner fires could not sustain themselves, and they began to die back into the heart of the world, where their embers glow still. This outer sphere where our foremothers lived became, first not so hot, then merely warm, and finally our ancestors began to feel the chill of outer space.

`For the first time since our people lived on Yesod, they began to notice the Long Year.

`Some of you know that our world circles Tiphereth, the red sun; or rather that Yesod and he circle each other. The time it takes for them to make one circle is what we call a little-year. But Tiphereth is old and weak, though hotter still than Yesod ever was. The little-seasons hardly change our lives at all, and we use them only to mark time.

`The Long Year is different.'

A gentle disturbance at the platform's edge, beyond the fringe of flamers, told her that more of her audience were arriving. It was one of the fourfold aliens, the blue-clothed one who seemed to be the others' guardian. Little Kebalau was with him, arms wrapped round his neck as he stepped from a welter-wing on to the scallop's rim. His escort pulled him to the front of the audience, and there he settled, his eyes behind the mask as wide and wondering as any child's.

Butavo went on. 'A Long Year lasts as long as it takes for five generations to grow up and become manyfold. In that time, Yesod and Tiphereth together circle the white sun, Kether. Kether is far away but fiercely hot, far brighter than Tiphereth.

Throughout the Long Summer, Kether is near, and he warms us like the nimbus of the First Creator. When Yesod moves away from him, we must rely on poor, feeble Tiphereth for all our warmth. And when we reach the furthest point from Kether, before our world begins her long slow journey back towards his light, we face the Long Midwinter.'

Butavo strengthened her nimbus a little, easing the weight on the tripod of her legs. She was 45 little-years old, and if she had left her body to its own devices it would have made her manyfold some time ago. She was not ready yet, neither for

manyfolding nor for her first ascent on to the Tree. It was selfish, certainly, but she had still felt the need to spend this, her first Festival, an ancient and venerable sevenfold: to know Midwinter once at least with friends and family, and children.

She shone, 'Our ancestors knew that, as Yesod's warmth leached slowly into space, each Long Year would be colder than the last; each Winter harsher and more bitter. They thought together long and hard about how they might best protect their children and descendants — protect us all — from that encroaching chill.

Ànd so they came together, and they grew the World-Tree.'

After the Festival, Butavo thought, after this Midwinter; once the Tree had drawn down warmth and light for one more Long Year, then she would allow herself to change. When she was manyfold, her own offspring would bud. That would be pleasing, surely — the seeds from all her youthful matings branching out into their own new lives. It would please Faramu and Turkessa, her guardian's offspring and her own erstwhile charges, to have children of their own at last.

The story was nearing its conclusion now. 'When that Long Year's Midwinter began to approach, the manyfold came together for the first time. The oldest of them who were ready to die joined root to branch, trunk to trunk, and so they fused, and they became the World-Tree. And then the younger manyfold, those not yet ready for the great joining, rose up and linked together, root and branch, and so the Midwinter Tree's twin crowns grew and grew.'

The children had received the tale many times before. Even the ones whom Butavo herself had never met would have been told it by their guardians, whenever they complained about the cold, when their own villages had set out for Treehaven. Only the alien — the Doctor — would find this old, old story new.

All of them attended faithfully, the visitor included.

`The Midwinter Tree was the Tree of Life, the Tree of Wisdom, for the manyfold became one in mind as well as body, and many who joined

the Tree that day remain part of the greatest mind the world has ever known.

'It grew taller, higher, its branches widening and spreading, until it stretched beyond the air and light and warmth of Yesod, and up into the cold dark chill of space.

`But there, the light of Tiphereth was waiting. The old red sun was warm enough still to heat the branches of the Tree; and so the manyfold who formed its outermost crown began to glow with heavenly fire.

Ànd all that radiance, that fire from heaven, was poured down by the Tree into the world, and Yesod was warm again.'

Not only Butavo but each child here, each of her own unbudded seeds and theirs, would be among the manyfold next winter. Each a responsible elder, each to play his or her part in building the Midwinter Tree. And one day, many Long Years hence, Butavo would cease to love her own life, and when the next Midwinter came she would climb up on to the trunk of the World-Tree, and never come back down. She would join with the great mind of the world, and there would be no more Butavo.

Ànd all the sevenfold,' she glimmered, 'all the six and fivefold, and the fourfold 224

with their children, three and two and onefold and new-budded fruits, gathered round. They gazed at what their mothers and their fathers, their foremothers and forefathers, had made. And as they basked in the radiance of the Tree they celebrated, with feasting and dancing and games.'

Her gaze was drawn against her will to the face of the alien Doctor. He was nodding thoughtfully, and Butavo was surprised to find in his eyes a sorrow to match her own.

Ànd that is how the first Midwinter Festival came about. And that is why, at every Long Midwinter since that time, we come together here at Treehaven, to mourn the death of the Long Year, and taste the promise of the distant Summer.'

W. Gemma

God, that was fun, Gemma thought. She might be in trouble now — oh, all right, she was definitely in trouble now — but it had been

worth it. That sweeping pass around the globular floating forest, the view of the giant Tree, the feel of the living hang-glider as it responded to her touch, that sense of total control over her destiny...

Someone had been talking. 'I'm sorry, what was that?' she asked politely.

Ì *said,'* the Doctor repeated, struggling to keep both his footing and dignity on the back of a skittish flying manta-ray, 'I'm actually quite cross about this. Come down from there at once, please, both of you.' Twenty feet above him on the coppery branch, Gemma tried not to smile. His mount's playfulness had the Doctor distinctly rattled.

The Doctor crossed his arms. The creature's curling wingtips churned the thick air slowly, sending blood-coloured eddies swirling through the trees. Above his head, the distant crown of the skyscraping bulk that was the Tree shone with its giant halo. 'Well?' he said. 'Are you coming down here, or do I have to come up there and get you?'

Gemma rolled her eyes. 'What are you, our mum?' Okay, that hadn't sounded quite as mature as she'd hoped.

Next to her, Samson said spinelessly, 'Erm, there's a bit of a snag, skipper.

We've kind of lost our hang-gliders. Soon as we'd parked our bottoms here they detached and took off home. We're stranded.'

The Doctor glared at them.

Ì know, it's a fair cop,' Samson went on uncomfortably. 'My fault, though. I didn't realise we were trespassing.'

Gemma groaned. 'Oh, stop being noble. It was my idea, Doctor. I asked Turkessa if he could get us the hang-gliders, and then I guilt-tripped Samson into coming with me.' She was always good at that: after all, how would Samson feel if his kid sister ended up in danger and he wasn't there to protect her? That sort of thing. Honestly, if it wasn't for her badgering him, he'd never have any fun at all.

And it had been fun. Of course it had also gone slightly pear-shaped shortly after she'd insisted they should get a closer look at the World-Tree. 'We kind of lost sight of Turkessa and Faramu,' her brother was explaining. 'We thought if we 225

found somewhere stable to stand, here in the forest, we might be able

to look for them. Or, you know, work out where we were ourselves. But the gliders had other ideas.'

Ì see.' The Doctor frowned. 'Right. Well, I suppose I'd better try to get this welter-wing up to you, then, hadn't I? Whoah,' he added as the creature bucked beneath him.

`Right,' he said again. 'I don't suppose you could just jump down here to me, could you?'

Gemma stared at him, then angled her gaze downwards, past their tree's silvery-bronze roots, into the purple abyss below. The lowest clouds were thin right now, and every few seconds she could see the gouts of flame that licked across the deeps, faster than express trains and a million times bigger. 'Hell'

wasn't an idea that she was used to giving a lot of thought to, but she really couldn't think of a better comparison right now.

Besides, she'd worked out quite a while ago that things fell a heck of a lot faster here. 'Um, no,' she said. 'Not in a million years.'

`What's another million here or there?' Samson muttered.

`Well, we're going to have to sort out something quickly,' the Doctor snapped.

Òur hosts are most annoyed. Heskiu is one of their most revered sages, he's meditating in preparation for his final union with the World-Tree, and if you children have disturbed him...' he trailed off.

Gemma frowned. 'So, this is his tree, is it?'

The Doctor closed his eyes, and rubbed his faceplate wearily. 'His tree,' he repeated. His manta tried to throw him again, but he didn't seem to notice.

Okay, so 'tree' was a misnomer, just like 'manta-ray', but Gemma didn't care.

The one they were sitting on didn't look like anything special. It had branches and roots, even if they were so symmetrical you could have just flipped it over in the air.

It had bark, tougher than a Yesodite's skin but equally metallic-looking. It even had a nimbus... much like those the Yesodites used to

keep themselves hovering...

but still...

Oh.

The radio-halo flickered slightly, then convulsed. It strobed, and suddenly the speakers inside Gemma's suit assailed her with a slow, deep, booming voice.

Ìs there perhaps something I can help you with?' it asked.

It sounded sleepy, puzzled and polite, in that very special way some people have of being polite shortly before they blow their top. Gemma and her brother looked at one another in appalled realisation.

Òkay,' said Samson laconically. 'This one can be your fault.'

V. The Doctor

Some time later, Heskiu and the Doctor were deep in conversation.

Once his young friends' misunderstanding had been explained and apologised for, the Doctor had found the manyfold a surprisingly tolerant man — far more so than he expected to be at Heskiu's age. Now that the venerable sage had been 226

disturbed from his meditations, he was perfectly willing to make time for a visitor to his world.

Heskiu didn't do small talk, but that suited the Doctor. He had a number of questions to put to the old man, beginning with, 'Tell me, would I be getting warm if I suggested your species wasn't native to this world?' This, in his ponderous way, Heskiu was answering now.

Òur legends all agree on one matter,' he pulsed. His resonant voice, as relayed by the suit, put the Doctor in mind of whalesong. 'Our people have lived here since our creation. And yet...'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'Yet?'

There was a long pause, of the kind the Doctor had come to expect when conversing with the older manyfold. 'There are,' Heskiu admitted, 'some tales that go further.'

The Time Lord settled back more comfortably into his seat. He had

managed to borrow a better-behaved vehicle — a bivalve with dirigible flotation bladders, whose open lower shell fitted his posterior perfectly. The forest of manyfold surrounded them in all directions — not excluding up and downwards — but most were deaf and silent, absorbed in their own contemplations.

`Some Yesodites believe,' Heskiu continued, 'that our creators came here from our rocky satellite, Malkuth, and that they were... not merely our creators. Some maintain that, when they first descended into our realm, they took on mortal flesh, remaking themselves as the first Yesodites. They were our ancestors as well as our makers... So the story goes.'

Ì thought so!' The Doctor tried to snap his gauntleted fingers. 'No species which evolved in a brown dwarf's photosphere has any right to look as human as you do, during your fourfold stage anyway. The Malkuthites must have re-engineered their own biodata so that their descendants could live here. You're no more alien than — well, let's just say you're not so very different from Samson and Gemma. Okay, you're heavily adapted — the metamorphic life-cycle, the nimbus, the metallic biochemistry — but you're orders of magnitude more human than the native species could possibly have been.

`There *was* a native species, wasn't there?' he added.

The giant had no face for the Doctor to read: Heskiu had lost all his humanoid features long ago. That final transformation must be quite astonishing to witness, thought the Doctor... although, of course, for people like Heskiu, there was nothing 'final' about it. A Yesodite lived far longer in this treelike form than in his or her earlier shape. Hence the enormous size to which Heskiu had grown. To him, his manyfolding so many Long Years ago must seem like birth.

At length the giant's radio-nimbus strobed. 'There are some... less inspiring myths. They cast the creators in an unhappy light. These have never been popular, and consequently they are rarely told. I may be the only living Yesodite who has received them. When I join the Tree they will pass from the people altogether.'

`Tell me,' the Doctor insisted.

`There is little to tell. It is common knowledge that our creators were not the Creator. It was not they who made the universe, nor Kether, Tiphereth or Yesod.

The... people whom they found here, when they came, were not their creatures to judge. Yet judge them they did, and found them wanting.'

The Doctor nodded sadly. 'They wiped them out, didn't they? Not just the sentient species, but the whole native biosphere. They uprooted them like weeds, to make way for their glorious new creation.'

Heskiu pulsed assent. 'In doing this, our ancestors offended the First Creator, whom it had pleased to set her creatures here. She cursed them, blighting their new world before they had sown their first seeds in it... and so Yesod grows colder and more bleak with each Long Year that passes. We bear the burden of our ancestors' sin.'

The Doctor smiled softly. 'You really *are* human. Trees of life, trees of knowledge, trees of good and evil... not to mention a midwinter festival. You may be millions of years older, but your myths don't change.

`So,' he asked soberly, 'how long do you have left now? Before Yesod gets so cold even the Midwinter Tree can't warm it up, I mean?'

Heskiu's nimbus was dark for so long that the Time Lord wondered whether the manyfold had sunk back into his contemplative trance. Then it flared up once more. 'We have some time still. It is true that each Long Year the Tree must stay intact for longer, and conduct more of Tiphereth's heat into the world, to last us through until the spring... Naturally, only the manyfold remember this from Long Year to Long Year.'

`Some of the others have guessed,' the Doctor said. 'Butavo, for example. She knows that Yesod is still losing heat. She knows what that will mean for your descendants.'

`The day will come,' Heskiu agreed, 'perhaps in the lifetime of your young friend, Kebalau, when there will be no choice but to preserve the Tree intact throughout the Long Year. Every man will be required to join as soon as he is manyfold, and every woman after she has budded. Our children will be forced to make their way without our guidance. And after that... yes, there will be a time when even this is not sufficient, and then our world will perish slowly in the cold.

This is the curse we bear.'

À curse?' the Doctor said, frowning. 'Oh, no, I don't think so. It's simple astrophysics, really. Yesod's a brown dwarf, a sub-stellar object. It may be bigger than the largest planet, but it could never have

sustained itself as a star. No, the cooling process is inevitable — what I don't understand is why your people haven't done anything about it. A species who can turn themselves into a giant solar conductor should be able to carry on adapting to changing circumstances.'

`There are... difficulties.' Again Heskiu's nimbus faded, dying back almost to nothingness. 'There are memories, buried deep within the mind of the World-Tree, of the Tree's first germination and growth. At that time our foremothers understood still the techniques of the creators. They were the first generation of Yesodites to become manyfold, and the first to join together in the Tree as a single mind. They altered their own natures to make this possible. They remade themselves.'

`Well, then!' the Doctor said. 'That's what you need to do. Presumably there's 228

some form of organic technology about the place for you to use — it looks like the Malkuthites provided you with a whole ecosystem full of the stuff. Your whole biosphere's an enormous tool kit. You just need to find out what —'

Heskiu strobed angrily. 'I told you that there were difficulties. We are not without intelligence and expertise... Our scholars have investigated this, and found it hopeless.'

`Really?' The Doctor struggled to understand. 'But surely you just need to reverse one aspect of the original bioengineering, give yourselves low-temperature biochemistries again. I mean, it's up to you, of course, but if you wanted to, you could go all the way — become human again, move back to Malkuth, Bob's your uncle. It's nice there at this time of year.'

Òur adaptations,' the giant flashed, 'are not reversible.'

The Doctor felt a chill inside his sweltering pressure suit.

`None of us knows the reason,' Heskiu went on, 'but it seems that our creators did not intend for them to be reversible. I am no scholar of life structures, but I am told that an attempt to restore any aspect of our original natures would lead to our extinction, faster than the cold itself .. I suppose that it suited some perverse sense of tragic poetry in our first ancestors, to know that eventually their offspring would suffer and die.'

It was the Doctor's turn to fall silent. Far away through the globular

forest, the World-Tree hung silhouetted against the dull red glow ofTiphereth, low in the sky.

Then he laughed softly.

Òh, I see,' he said. 'Yes, of course. It's the way life works. Death's part of life.'

Heskiu's radio-nimbus pulsed in a way that the Doctor's suit-radio chose to interpret as an irritated grunt. 'That is not a particularly profound observation, Doctor.'

The Doctor drummed his fingers against his faceplate. 'We all die,' he elaborated, 'even if some of us go through all kinds of changes first. Evolution's shaped like... well, not to be too predictable, but like a tree. Some branches, like humanity, become thick, sturdy boughs and sprout limbs of their own. Others are just twigs, snapped off in their prime.'

Àre you suggesting,' Heskiu strobed, 'that we should simply accept our fate philosophically? It is a position held by some. I admit that I had not looked for it in you.'

`No, no,' the Doctor said quickly. 'That isn't what I'm saying at all. New shoots can grow from dead wood — in fact, most of a tree consists of dead cells. Only the outermost parts are alive.

'I think the Malkuthites knew all of this. They knew that they were dying, and that you would be their legacy. They wanted you to branch and divide in turn. They didn't mean for you to stay on Yesod forever, and they certainly never intended you to return to Malkuth. They made you to grow and proliferate, not to shrink back on yourselves.

`This world is just a staging post — a step on your journey. You're supposed to adapt yourselves to Tiphereth. Your people are the Malkuthites' bequest to the universe, and the... well, Tipherethites, if that isn't too much of a mouthful, will 229

be your own. Who knows, maybe from Tiphereth your descendants can colonise Kether, and then — well, the sky's the limit, basically. There are a lot of stars out there.

Ì must say, Heskiu,' he said, 'I'm impressed by the scope of their ambition. I'm not wild about their genocide of the native Yesodi, mind, but even so... to have changed the world on such a scale, so that their descendants could aspire to that

— it's breathtaking! And that's your heritage, Heskiu.'

Heskiu's darkness this time seemed to last for hours. Eventually he glimmered, Ì will take the matter to the Tree. We discuss it.'

`Fab,' said the Doctor.

Ìf you are correct...' Heskiu began.

`Nonsense,' the Doctor said. 'Think nothing of it. Call it a payment for your generous hospitality. Or a Christmas present. After all, Christmas doesn't last forever either. Just think of all the pairs of slippers you'd get through! Well, not you, of course, but —'

`For a wise man,' Heskiu observed, 'you speak a great deal of nonsense.'

`Me? A wise man?' The Doctor beamed. 'Yes, I suppose I am. After all, I did come here following a star.'

VI. Kebalau

Now Kebalau floats still as a house-shell, holding her present, the cold and glittering ball that the Doctor gave her, tight in her hands. She watches as the lines and colours of the TARDIS drain away and vanish. The creature leaves its nimbus behind, a whirling, greying signal that persists for a short while before it too fades away.

Kebbi understands why her friends had to leave — they all come from a very cold place, the Doctor told her, and even at Midwinter this world is too hot for them.

When the Tree begins to welcome the sun's warmth down into the world, its glow will be more than they can bear.

Kebalau wishes that she could have gone with them, but the thought of those cold places frightens her. She's glad to be staying, even at Midwinter.

Besides, her family would miss her if she went. She shrugs, and flits up to the house's carapace, where Eturu and Arape are waiting with Lubbi and Mebbi. The manyfold are building the Tree at last, and it's time for everyone to watch. All around them, above and below, the other families from all across the world *are* watching too.

From here the manyfold are tiny flecks of light, like motes or spark-

flies, dancing about the World-Tree. Somewhere among them, Kebbi knows, is Wuter, and she thinks about how next Midwinter she will be there too, along with everyone she knows. She wonders what it must feel like, to become part of the biggest living creature in the world.

Time passes. Slowly the manyfold cluster together on the Tree, which stretches gradually ever upwards. Soon the world will be warm, and everyone will celebrate, looking forward to the Long Summer to come.

230

All Kebalau's impatience is forgotten as the Tree takes on its final form. Its branches grow ever higher, stretching up towards the giant sun, to Tiphereth; and, as the Tree begins to glow at last with the Midwinter fire, its crown appears to touch the star itself.

231

Document Outline

- 001.pdf
- 002.pdf
- st15.pdf
  - Page 1
  - Page 2
  - Page 3
  - Page 4
  - Page 5
  - Page 6
  - Page 7
  - Page 8
  - Page 9
  - Page 10
  - Page 11
  - Page 12
  - Page 13
  - Page 14
  - Page 15
  - Page 16
  - Page 17
  - Page 18
  - Page 19
  - Page 20
  - Page 21
  - Page 22
  - Page 23
  - Page 24
  - Page 25
  - Page 26
  - Page 27
  - Page 28
  - Page 29
  - Page 30
  - Page 31
  - Page 32
  - Page 33
  - Page 34
  - Page 35
  - Page 36
  - Page 37
  - Page 38

- Page 39
- Page 40
- Page 41
- Page 42
- Page 43
- Page 44
- Page 45
- Page 46
- Page 47
- Page 48
- Page 49
- Page 50
- Page 51
- Page 52
- Page 53
- Page 54
- Page 55
- Page 56
- Page 57
- Page 58
- Page 59
- Page 60
- Page 61
- Page 62
- Page 63
- Page 64
- Page 65
- Page 66
- Page 67
- Page 68
- Page 69
- Page 70
- Page 71
- Page 72
- Page 73
- Page 74
- Page 75
- Page 76
- Page 77
- Page 78
- Page 79
- Page 80
- Page 81
- Page 82

- Page 83
- Page 84
- Page 85
- Page 86
- Page 87
- Page 88
- Page 89
- Page 90
- Page 91
- Page 92
- Page 93
- Page 94
- Page 95
- Page 96
- Page 97
- Page 98
- Page 99
- Page 100
- Page 101
- Page 102
- Page 103
- Page 104
- Page 105
- Page 106
- Page 107
- Page 108
- Page 109
- Page 110
- Page 111
- Page 112
- Page 113
- Page 114
- Page 115
- Page 116
- Page 117
- Page 118
- Page 119
- Page 120
- Page 121
- Page 122
- Page 123
- Page 124
- Page 125
- Page 126

- Page 127
- Page 128
- Page 129
- Page 130
- Page 131
- Page 132
- Page 133
- Page 134
- Page 135
- Page 136
- Page 137
- Page 138
- Page 139
- Page 140
- Page 141
- Page 142
- Page 143
- Page 144
- Page 145
- Page 146
- Page 147
- Page 148
- Page 149
- Page 150
- Page 151
- Page 152
- Page 153
- Page 154
- Page 155
- Page 156
- Page 157
- Page 158
- Page 159
- Page 160
- Page 161
- Page 162
- Page 163
- Page 164
- Page 165
- Page 166
- Page 167
- Page 168
- Page 169
- Page 170

- Page 171
- Page 172
- Page 173
- Page 174
- Page 175
- Page 176
- Page 177
- Page 178
- Page 179
- Page 180
- Page 181
- Page 182
- Page 183
- Page 184
- Page 185
- Page 186
- Page 187
- Page 188
- Page 189
- Page 190
- Page 191
- Page 192
- Page 193
- Page 194
- Page 195
- Page 196
- Page 197
- Page 198
- Page 199
- Page 200
- Page 201
- Page 202
- Page 203
- Page 204
- Page 205
- Page 206
- Page 207
- Page 208
- Page 209
- Page 210
- Page 211
- Page 212
- Page 213
- Page 214

- Page 215
- Page 216
- Page 217
- Page 218
- Page 219
- Page 220